



THE SUMMERLAND

P.S. MONTGOMERY

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CHAPTER ONE

April 15, 1993

On a warm, sunny Friday afternoon, Jack Hunter found himself deeply engrossed in jotting down important notes at his desk in the bustling car dealership office that he owned. As the warm sunlight streamed through the window, he couldn't help but wince and groan, feeling the strain of a long and demanding week. A pounding headache and a mild burning sensation behind his eyelids made it clear that he was utterly exhausted. The dull ache in his back only added to his discomfort. Not only was he relieved that it was Friday, but he was also ecstatic about taking a much-needed break from work for the next two weeks. Jack looked up as Terri, his ever-efficient receptionist, briskly walked in.

"Jack, use the *computer*," Terri said, smiling and shaking her head.

Jack laughed, tossed his pen across the table, and leaned back in his chair.

"Nope," Jack said with a distinct southern accent and a smile, "Terri, there's a certain charm in doing things the old-fashioned way. It keeps the brain sharp and the hands steady. Besides, computers are like that one friend who promises to help you move—half the time, they're a no-show, and when they do turn up, they somehow make the process more chaotic."

Terri and Jack shared a light-hearted laugh, the tension of the day momentarily lifting.

"Anyway," Terri said, her tone shifting to serious, "I need your help with this woman."

"What's the problem?" Jack asked, intrigued.

Terri turned to glance over her shoulder, her eyes narrowing slightly.

"She's a single mother with awful credit, and she wants a car for next to nothing. When I tried to lay it out for her, let's just say—things got a bit heated. I figured you'd be the best person to handle it."

Jack raised an eyebrow, his gaze falling on the young Black woman with shoulder-length black hair in the showroom, seated beside her seven-year-old daughter, who was lost in the world of her coloring book. With a resigned nod and a deep breath, Jack stood up, ready to take on the challenge. Terri followed close behind.

"Good morning, ma'am," Jack greeted, his smile warm and welcoming as he sat across from the woman at the desk. "I'm Jack Hunter, owner of Hunter Auto Sales. My receptionist, Terri here, said you're trying to buy a car."

He extended his hand to the woman, and she shook it and briefly smiled.

"Yeah," the woman said, "see—"

"Well, hold on," Jack interjected. "Let's start with your name."

"My name's Daria."

Jack nodded, smiling again.

"Daria, very pretty name."

"Thank you."

"Okay, so, what's your story, Daria?" Jack asked.

"Okay," Daria began, "so I just got hired on a new job, a job that I really need because it took almost four months for me to find employment, but the only way I can get to work is by car—"

"So that's why you're here," Jack interjected.

"Right," Daria answered before sliding him over a paper. "Here's

my proof of employment. I'm not making much—but a job is a job, and with me having a job, I can make monthly payments—but my credit is horrible, I know—”

The woman stopped as Jack sighed loudly. He took his eyeglasses out of his shirt pocket, put them on, picked up the paper, and began to read.

“Well, first, congratulations on the job,” Jack said with a faint, brief smile.

“Thank you,” Daria replied.

“Do you have any money to put down on a car?” Jack sked.

“No,” Terri said with an icy tone while staring at Daria with pursed lips and a raised brow. “She thinks she can get a car for *free* today.”

“No, I *don't*. *Thank* you very much,” Daria snapped before rolling her eyes. “You don’t even know *what* I *think*!”

“Excuse me!” Terri exclaimed with widened eyes. “I do so know—”

“Oh—okay, okay,” Jack interrupted with a brief frown before looking at Terri. “Terri, since you love that—electronic machine on my desk so much, can you do me a solid and go into my office and print out the lease agreement you put on there for Monday’s appointment?”

Terri briefly widened her eyes and slightly tilted her head with a sigh.

“Okay.”

After watching Terri walk into his office, Jack turned back to face Daria and smiled.

“I’m sorry,” Jack said, “you’ve caught her on one of her bad days. She’s usually sweeter than a glass of iced tea.”

Daria raised a brow with a shake of her head.

“Bad timing for me then,” Daria replied.

Jack laughed, nodded, and sighed while sitting forward and resting his clasped hands on the desk and frowning.

“So, did Terri tell you that we have strict credit requirements at this dealership here?” Jack asked. “We don’t deal with anyone with bad credit or no credit at all—”

"No," Daria replied, "she didn't tell me. I didn't know—"

"Yeah, my policy is that you have to have at least a six-ninety credit score before I can put you in one of my cars. I'm sorry."

Daria stared at him silently for a few seconds before looking away and nodding, a watery film clouding her eyes.

"Okay," she replied in a low tone. "I was just hoping—never mind."

With haste, Daria got up, walked over to her seven-year-old, and took her by the hand.

"Come on, Sophia, let's go," Daria said as she walked to the door.

"I thought we were getting a car, Mommy," Sophia said.

"No, we're not going to be getting one from this place either, honey," Daria said in a quivering voice.

"Well, how are we going to get home?" Sophia asked.

"The same way we got here. We're gonna walk, baby," Daria responded before walking out.

Jack's eyes widened before he frowned as he watched her walk through his dealership's parking lot. Rising from his seat, he went outside, following his curiosity.

"Hey, hey, wait a minute," Jack said as he walked in front of Daria. "Did I hear you right? You *walked* here?"

Daria nodded.

"Yeah," she replied in a low tone.

Jack nodded, still with his frown, before briefly looking away from her.

"If you don't mind me asking, where do you live?" Jack asked.

"In Mechanicsville," Daria replied.

Jack's eyes widened.

"You walked from Mechanicsville to *here*?" Jack asked. "Driving from Mechanicsville to Richmond is only about fifteen minutes, but on foot, it's gotta be like—*three hours*. That's a *long* trek."

Daria sighed, looked away, and nodded with a brief frown.

"I know," Daria replied, "the things you'll do out of desperation."

Jack watched as Daria walked around him and towards the parking lot's exit.

"Okay," Jack said as he walked after her and stepped in front of her again, "come on back inside so we can talk about this."

Daria stared at him with a brief smile and raised brows.

"Really?"

"Yeah, come on," Jack said before returning to his dealership.

Daria followed and once again sat across from him at the desk in the showroom. Jack sighed as he put his elbows on the desk and pressed his clasped hands to his mouth.

"Okay, look—I've *never* done anything like this before," Jack said, "but I'm going to for you. You see that white Hyundai i10 behind you?"

Daria glanced back at the white car behind her before turning back around and nodding at him.

"Yeah," she replied.

"I can put you in that car today if you agree to pay your first monthly payment when you get your first paycheck. You think you can do that?"

Daria looked at him and smiled with a faint frown.

"Yeah—but I thought you said you don't deal with anyone with bad credit?"

"Well, I *don't*," Jack said, smiling and nodding, "but today, you're the exception. I'm doing this because you're a single mother. You're trying to make a living and take care of your little one, and I can only imagine how hard that has to be, and then you walked for over an hour just to get here and get something you *need*? That's very commendable."

Daria looked away with briefly widened eyes, a breathed laugh, and a slight shake of her head.

"So," Jack said before sighing and nodding. "You'll take the car today, with you signing a lease stating that you'll pay three hundred a month, *every* month. If you miss *one* month though—just *one*, this deal is *off*, understood—"

Daria's eyes widened as she smiled.

"Wait, so you're actually *serious*? You're telling me you're going to give me a car?"

"Well, I'm not *giving* you a car. I'm *leasing* you a car that you can drive home today—"

Jack stopped as Daria screamed, jumped up, and rushed over to him, hugging him.

"Oh my God, *thank you!*" Daria cried before breaking into light sobs. "Thank you so much, Mr. Hunter!"

Jack laughed and hugged her back.

"You're welcome, but you have to make your payments *every* month on time until you're all paid off. You miss just *one* payment, and I'm taking the car back, no exceptions—"

"No, I promise I will make *every* payment on time. Thank you so much, Mr. Hunter!"

"Okay, and—don't go telling anyone you know about this, because I'm only doing this for you, all right?" Jack said.

"No, I won't, I promise. Thank you, Mr. Hunter."

"Again, you're welcome," Jack said, smiling while standing up. "Terri will be back out here in a minute with paperwork to go over with you. In the meantime, feel free to help yourself to a cup of coffee at the counter over there, okay?"

"I will. Thank you so much, Mr. Hunter," she said, wiping her tears away.

Jack nodded with a wink and a smile before returning to his office.

As he walked over to his desk, he stopped in front of it. Terri was sitting behind it, staring at him with a frown while shaking her head. He smiled, his brow raised.

"Uh oh, I know that look. Am I in trouble?" Jack joked.

As he laughed, Terri stood up, walked from behind his desk, and sighed with another shake of her head.

"I thought your policy was good credit only, Jack," Terri said.

"Yeah," Jack said before dropping down in his chair behind his desk, "but see, the good thing about owning your own dealership, though, is that you can always change the very same rules you created."

"Jack, you know *she's* not going to keep payments up—"

"Why won't she?" Jack interjected with a brow raised.

"Those people *never* pay *any* of their bills on time, Jack; you know that."

Jack frowned at her before rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

"Terri, don't do that," Jack warned.

"I'm just saying, Jack, you and I both know they aren't good with paying their bills—"

"Okay, look," Jack interjected while writing on a notepad. "Terri, I think that I'm a pretty good judge of character, and from what I can see of hers, she's a mother who *needed* a blessing, so I decided to extend one to her."

"Jack—"

"Terri," Jack interjected sternly and with a furrowed brow as he forcefully placed his pen on the desk before rising to his feet. "I *need* you to prepare a detailed lease based on the notes on this notepad and make sure that she signs it. Make sure to obtain a copy of her driver's license and social security card. After all that, hand her the keys to the Hyundai i10 parked behind her. *All right?*"

Terri locked eyes with him and realized it was best not to push any further.

"Fine, okay," she replied with a nervous laugh and a shake of her head. "I swear, though, Jack, you've got a heart as big as Texas."

"Good, hopefully that means God's got me on his VIP list in heaven then," Jack said, which caused Terri to laugh.

He grabbed his keys from his desk drawer and walked to his office door.

"All right, I'm going home. Have a good weekend, and I'll see you in

two weeks.”

“Absolutely,” Terri replied. “Have a good weekend and vacation, Jack”

Later that afternoon, Noah Hunter, Jack’s eight-year-old son, rode his scooter around the backyard of their chalet-style home in Farmville, Virginia. From the backyard deck, Jack watched his son with a warm smile. After a few minutes, Jack turned to go inside the house just before Noah rode into the woods. A few minutes later, Noah loudly screamed, prompting Jack to bolt out of the house and towards the woods.

“Noah!” Jack yelled.

As Jack ran into the woods, he found Noah sobbing with a scraped leg and his scooter on top of him. Jack dropped to his knees, coughing and spitting blood, unable to stop. Breaking out of his sobbing, Noah gasped.

“Dad, are you okay?” Noah asked; his eyes widened.

Clutching his chest tightly, Jack winced. A sharp, burning pain shot through every part of his chest with every breath he took. He knew he wasn’t out of shape because he was in excellent physical shape for his age. After a moment of struggle, he managed to keep his coughing at bay.

“Dad, are you okay?” Noah asked. “Please tell me you’re okay.”

Jack lifted the scooter off Noah before sighing and hugging him.

“Yeah, I’m fine, kiddo. It was just a little cold in my chest, but I’m fine now,” Jack said as he pulled a small plastic-wrapped bundle of napkins from his back pants pocket.

Jack was lying. He *wasn’t* fine. Sure, his lungs had reopened, and his coughing had stopped, but his chest still ached. Jack wiped the blood from Noah’s leg with two napkins from the plastic wrap. Noah wiped away his streaming tears as he watched his father tend to his injury. The

frown of pain on Noah's face vanished, giving way to a relaxed expression. Comforted by Jack's actions, Noah extended his arms and pulled him into a hug. Embracing the moment, Jack responded with laughter as he hugged Noah back.

"Now, Noah, what did I tell you about riding in these woods?" Jack asked, smiling and raising a brow.

"Not to do it because it isn't safe," Noah replied in his small, childlike voice, "but Dad, I thought it would be okay because I'm not on my bike; I'm on my scooter."

"No, there's no difference between the bike and the scooter. It's still dangerous. Do you know how scared I was when I heard you yelling? If something were to happen to you, I would be devastated. Promise me you'll avoid these woods when riding your bike or scooter, okay?"

Noah nodded.

"I promise, Dad, I will. I'm sorry for scaring you."

Jack nodded.

"It's okay, son," Jack said while hugging Noah and kissing him on the head.

As evening turned into night, in Noah's bedroom, Jack kneeled beside Noah and listened as Noah said his bedtime prayer.

"God, thank you for allowing me to see another day," Noah said. "Bless Dad and me and keep us safe throughout the night. I love you. Amen."

"Amen, good job, kiddo," Jack said while getting to his feet. "Now into bed you go; come on."

Noah climbed into bed, and Jack sat beside him, pulling the covers over him.

"Dad, even as you get older, will you promise to stay with me until I grow older too?" Noah asked.

Jack furrowed his brow for a moment, puzzled by Noah's question.

"Now, why do you ask something like that?" Jack inquired.

"Well, Dad, sometimes you don't look so well, and it scares me because it makes me think you might not live to see me grow up."

With a sad smile, Jack frowned at Noah and briefly bit his lower lip. He looked away for a few seconds, his eyes filling with tears.

"Noah," Jack said in a low tone, "you know—I used to be afraid of the same thing too, but since knowing God, I'm just not anymore, and you shouldn't be either. I promise I'm not going anywhere anytime soon. God will make sure that I'm here *for* you and *with* you throughout your life, even when you grow up and start your own family. All that's happening is just that I'm getting older, that's all it is, and essentially, getting older just means that I am changing. There's no need to be afraid of change. In fact, we should embrace it. It's like that song I used to sing to you, remember?"

"Landslide," Noah replied.

"Yeah," Jack replied, smiling.

"Well, I've been afraid of changing," Jack sang in a low voice while brushing Noah's brown hair out of his eyes. "Cause I built my life around you, but time makes you bolder; children get older; I'm getting older, too."

"I love that song, Dad," Noah said, smiling.

"I know you do. I do too, because it always reminds me of you. It's my favorite song."

Noah laughed as Jack smiled and winked at him while playfully pinching Noah's nose.

"Well, good night, slugger," Jack said before kissing him on the forehead. "Get some rest. I love you, and I'll see you in the morning, okay?"

"Okay, I love you too; goodnight, Dad," Noah replied, smiling.

As Jack turned off the light in Noah's room and walked out, he closed the door behind him with a brief close of his eyes and a long sigh. Jack rushed to the hallway bathroom, shut the door, and pressed his back against it as tears clouded his eyes. Staring downwards, he tightened his grip into fists, striving to keep his tears from flowing down. Up until that night, he had always been truthful with his son. The fear of dying and missing out on his son's milestones—growing up, heading to college, and building a family—weighed heavily on him. His son meant *everything* to him. Jack felt tempted to reveal to Noah the next morning that his cancer had returned.

However, as he shook his head and frowned with a brief close of his eyes, he found himself unable to do so. Deep down, Jack harbored a hope that he wouldn't need to share the news, clinging to the possibility of a miraculous intervention from God. As Jack walked to the sink, he started coughing again, eventually spitting up several thick chunks of blood. He looked at the blood in the sink, his grayish blue eyes welling up with tears once more. He closed his eyes as tears streamed and held onto the sink with such intensity that he could feel a burning pressure pulsing through the palms of his hands.

"God, please," Jack pleaded in a low, tearful voice. "Please don't let me die from this. Noah needs me. Please, if you could just—speak to me, I need to know you're listening to me."

Jack shot open his eyes upon hearing chirping. He looked at the medicine cabinet mirror view behind him but saw nothing. The chirping grew louder, making him spin around and look all around the bathroom. He saw nothing that could explain the sound. The bathroom lights flickered, and when he turned back to the mirror, he saw a glowing, red-eyed, tall, black, hooded figure just inches behind him. He gasped and jumped away in fear, seeing heavy black smoke surrounding the figure. Jack's muscles tensed up, his stomach knotted, his legs burned, his heart pounded, and he broke out in a heavy sweat as the bathroom

light flickered.

"I—I must be dreaming or hallucinating," Jack whispered, closing his eyes tightly. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid—"

Jack stopped as he felt a hot, fiery breath on his face. Opening his eyes, he yelled as he saw a tall figure standing close in front of him. With the figure's hood removed, Jack could now clearly see the figure's head and face. The figure had an oblong-shaped, dark gray head with five glowing red eyes. Its open mouth was black, curved, and as large and wide as a gaping hole. Two long horns protruded from both sides of its head, with long, straggly black hair covering the back of its head down to its neck. Jack pivoted to make a dash for it but found himself unable to move his legs.

"Go away," Jack whispered in a low voice, "go away and leave me alone. In the name of—"

Jack stopped and let out a short yell as the figure wrapped its hand around his neck, slammed him down to the floor, straddled him, and choked him. Jack tried to free himself from the figure's grip by hitting its hands with his fists, but the figure's strength was overwhelming. Jack gagged as the bathroom light flickered rapidly, and the walls filled with the sound of faint chanting in an unknown language, as if from a million voices. As Jack struggled to breathe, a dense, dark blue light emanated from the figure's mouth and surged into Jack's, eliciting a piercing yell from him. His face flushed red, and every vein in his forehead and neck bulged. After a few moments, his complexion took on a blue hue.

Waves of intense pain surged through his chest as if forcefully taking the air from him. Sharp, jabbing sensations shot through his forehead, adding to the overwhelming discomfort he was experiencing. As the light continued to beam into Jack's mouth, the chanting grew louder and more intense, reaching an almost deafening point. Jack's fists

clenched so tightly that his palms began to draw blood. Tears streamed down his face as Jack braced for death. Yet, closing his eyes and envisioning his son Noah, with his radiant smile and infectious laughter, brought a flicker of hope. Suddenly, Noah's voice filled his mind, clear and comforting, dispelling the shadows of despair.

"Dad!" Noah yelled. "Dad, are you all right? Dad!"

Jack's throat constricted as he attempted to shout for his son, the blinding light stealing his voice. Just as Noah burst through the bathroom door, the shadowy figure disappeared; the bathroom light ceased its chaotic flickering, and the haunting chanting fell silent, leaving an unsettling calm.

"Dad, are you okay?" Noah shouted as he rushed over to his father and dropped down beside him.

Jack gasped loudly and sat up as tears flowed from his eyes. He quickly crawled back against the wall, coughing severely for several minutes.

"Dad, what happened? Are you okay?"

Jack lowered his head into his trembling hands, breathless and overwhelmed, struggling to utter even a single word. It wasn't just the shock that left him speechless; he felt completely exhausted, lacking the energy to speak. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Noah reached out and gently shook his father's knee in an attempt to rouse him.

"Dad? Dad, what happened? I heard you yelling, what's going on?" Noah shouted.

Jack remained silent for a few moments, deeply shaken. The experience had terrified him more than anything else he had ever encountered. After several seconds, he finally reached out and took Noah's hand.

"I'm—I'm fine, Noah," Jack said in a low, rough voice. "I just, um—I was having bad chest pain."

"Chest pain?" Noah shouted, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"Yeah, but it was just heartburn, Noah. I'm fine now. Come on, let's get you back to bed, okay?"

Noah squinted at his father, trying to decipher if he was being honest.

"Dad, are you sure? I mean, because—"

"Yeah," Jack interrupted, struggling to get to his feet. "Yeah, I'm fine. Now, come on, let's get you back to bed."

As Noah rose alongside his father, a frown appeared on his face upon noticing Jack leaning against the wall for support, his own expression reflecting the tension. Everything around him seemed to fade into a blur. His legs felt alarmingly unsteady. A dense fog enveloped his mind, obscuring his thoughts as he squeezed his eyes shut. With a tremor running through his fingers that were pressed to his temple, he took a slow, measured breath, trying to steady himself amid the turmoil.

"Dad, are you really sure—"

"Yes!" Jack yelled, causing Noah to gasp.

A searing heat radiated behind Jack's eyelids, prompting him to press his wrists against his eyes as he shook his head in frustration. It was as if his head were burdened by a heavy stone, weighing him down with an unbearable heaviness. After a moment, he lowered his hands and let out a deep, weary sigh, seeking relief from the overwhelming pressure.

"I'm sorry," Jack said in a low voice while walking to the sink. "I'm sorry for yelling at you. Look, I really need to lie down. Can you just—go get back in bed, and I'll see you in the morning, okay?"

Not wanting to face another outburst from his father, Noah quickly nodded and hurried out of the bathroom. With his red, tearful eyes, Jack glanced up at the mirror, studying his reflection carefully. While doing so, he thought back on what he had just experienced. How

could it have happened? More importantly, *why* did it happen to him? Those questions lingered unanswered, and the throbbing pain in his head made it impossible for him to muster the energy to seek any answers right then.

Later, as Jack lay in bed with his eyes closed, he made a concerted effort to fall asleep. He was practically forcing his mind to shut down. However, it was challenging because the memories of what he had experienced kept replaying in his mind. The mere thought of it caused Jack's brows to furrow and sent a shiver down his spine. As the face of the hideous figure who attacked him came into his vision, Jack took a sharp inhale of breath and then opened his eyes.

With his heart skipping beats, he exhaled to try to calm down. *Stop thinking about it, Jack. It was Satan; it was nothing but Satan trying to attack you, but God stepped in, right in time, and rescued you through Noah. That was it. Let it go and get some sleep.* Closing his eyes once more, all he saw behind his closed eyelids was darkness. As he counted in his mind from ten down to one, within seconds, he found himself drifting off to sleep.

The next morning, Jack staggered into the kitchen, yawning. Each step towards the stove felt like lifting weights. His body ached for more rest. Despite a long night's sleep, his eyes drooped, and his movements were slow and heavy. Ignoring his own strong lack of appetite, which had persisted for days, he began preparing Noah's usual southern Saturday morning breakfast, a routine he couldn't skip. Jack opened the oven, took out a frying pan, and set it on the front burner. However, when he tried to ignite the burner, no flame appeared. Perplexed, he turned the knob off and then back on; yet still, no flame emerged. Jack, feeling

frustrated, sucked his teeth and rolled his eyes.

Jack turned off the burner, waited five seconds, and then turned it on again. He heard the stove click but saw no flame. Jack raised a brow while staring at the stove. Despite his fear of fire, which stemmed from his mother's death in a fire when he was three, he contemplated lighting the burner manually. As he rubbed his forehead and slammed his hand on the stove, he suddenly noticed flames emanating from his fingertips.

"Holy!" Jack exclaimed while jumping away from the stove.

Jack frantically shook his right hand, yet the flames clinging to his fingertips refused to extinguish as if each digit had become a lighter. His face turned deathly pale; his heart raced, and a wave of heat surged through him. Looking at the stove, he confirmed the flames didn't originate there, as no evidence of fire was present. The flames, he realized, were emanating from him. Holding his right hand before his eyes, Jack stared in disbelief at the fiery tips of his fingers and shook his head.

"How in the *world*?" Jack whispered.

Jack was uncertain whether he was hallucinating or dreaming, yet everything at that moment *seemed* real. He experienced no pain, only a sensation of flames pulsating through every vein in his fingers, reminiscent of a percussion massager. Glancing at the stove, he cautiously approached it, contemplating whether his idea would succeed. Lowering his right hand, he pointed his index finger towards the burner. Instantly, the burner ignited, and as the flames disappeared from his fingertips, Jack's eyes grew wide.

"No—how did I—*what* did I—no, *no*!" Jack said aloud while shaking his head.

He raised his right hand and examined it. It appeared normal, showing no signs that fire had once emanated from his fingertips. However, when Jack looked at the burner, there was a fire.

"Morning, Dad," Noah said as he entered the kitchen.

Startled, Jack jumped at the sound of Noah's voice and spun around to face him. Jack blinked five times in three seconds, staring straight at Noah like a deer caught in headlights. Noah sat at the kitchen table with a brow raised, staring at his father.

"Dad, you look like you've just seen a ghost. Are you okay?"

Jack closed his eyes and bit down hard on his lower lip for a few seconds before shaking his head. After opening his eyes, he nodded.

"Yeah, yeah, I just had a crazy—yeah, I'm fine. Ready for breakfast?" Jack replied with a forced, brief smile.

"Sure, but only if it includes eggs, grits, fatback, bacon, toast, and sausage!" Noah exclaimed as he picked up Jack's cell phone and tapped the screen.

With a deep sigh, Jack nodded, closed his eyes for a few seconds, and then nodded again.

"Yeah, yeah, okay. Breakfast is on the way," Jack said in a low voice.

Later, as Noah sat at the kitchen table, sipping orange juice, Jack cooked fatback, bacon, and sausage on the stove. Tracy Lawrence's "Time Marches On" played on the radio on the counter.

"Hey, Dad," Noah said, "after breakfast, can we go play baseball in the backyard?"

Jack sighed with a frown and a slight shake of his head.

"Oh, Noah, I—I really don't have any energy to play today."

"Dad, *please*?" Noah asked, his widened eyes sparkling with hope. "It would be good practice for me for next week's game."

Jack tiredly sighed and rolled his eyes as a brief frown appeared on his face. He could barely muster the energy to flip the bacon sizzling in the pan, so how could he possibly find the strength to go out to the backyard and play an entire baseball game with his son? Still, he understood that he needed to dig deep and uncover that inner spark because disappointing his son was simply not an option.

“Okay,” Jack said in a low, gloomy tone while nodding with a brief close of his eyes. “This afternoon, we can, but only *one* game, okay?”

“Yes!” exclaimed Noah, resulting in a breathed laugh from Jack. “Hey, before breakfast is ready, can I go upstairs and get my lucky baseball glove from the attic?”

“Sure,” Jack replied.

Noah quickly jumped up and dashed out. As Jack scooped the bacon out of the pan and onto a plate, he leaned his hand against the stove and furrowed his brows. He closed his eyes as his mind returned to the vision of his fiery fingertips. The vision wouldn’t leave his mind; it stayed there as if frozen to the walls inside his brain. Opening his eyes, he turned and looked at the door that led outside. He walked over to it and walked out onto his back deck.

Jack stood in his large, well-kept backyard, raising his right hand to point his pointer finger at the grass. Curious to see if he could replicate the earlier incident at the stove, he concentrated hard. *Light up! Fire! Fire! Fire!* Seconds later, a burst of fire shot from his fingertip, forming a floating, blue, electricity-streaked, medium-sized fireball. Jack gasped with widened eyes and stepped back in surprise. The fireball, now with blue electricity streaks, remained suspended in the air.

“Wha—what in the world is going on here?” Jack said in a low voice.

Jack slowly stepped forward and touched the ball of fire. Immediately, it beamed out onto the grass in his yard, scorching it instantly, causing Jack to gape and widen his eyes again.

“Oh my God!” Jack exclaimed.

“Whoa, Dad! What happened to the yard?” Noah exclaimed as he rushed over to Jack.

Spinning around on his toes to face Noah, Jack’s face looked paler than a ghost.

“Wh—what?” Jack asked, his voice low and slightly shaky.

“That patch of grass in the yard over there,” Noah replied, staring at the backyard with a half-shocked smile, “it looks completely scorched. What happened?”

Jack was at a loss for words, especially because he didn't have an answer himself.

“Did you see what just happened?” Jack asked.

“No, *what happened?*” Noah asked, now impatiently.

Jack closed his eyes and sighed with relief, thankful Noah hadn't seen what he had just done. He didn't want anyone to witness it because how could he possibly explain it? Opening his eyes, Jack rubbed his hands down his face and shook his head before forcing a brief, contrived smile.

“I don't know, Noah. I wondered what happened too, but don't worry about it. After breakfast, I'll find out. Let's get back inside and have breakfast, okay?”

Before Noah could reply, Jack hurried back inside, his stride quick and purposeful, a silent request for the conversation to end. Noah watched him for a moment, his shoulders lifted in a resigned shrug before he turned to follow. Inside, Jack approached the stove, his hands finding its cool surface for support. He pressed his palms against the metal, closed his eyes, and let out a deep, measured exhale. It was a silent struggle; it was his attempt to compartmentalize and shove the turmoil of the conversation into a corner of his mind, hoping it would stay there.

Later, Jack and his younger brother, Joel, stood on the back deck of their house.

“So, wait,” Joel said, smiling and raising a brow, “you're telling me that fire came from your fingertips like your fingers were some kind of a uh—damn *lighter* or something?”

"Yeah," Jack said, lowering the baseball cap further down on his head and sighing. "I mean, Joel, the whole thing almost scared the life out of me—"

"Yeah, okay, do it now," Joel said. "Show it to me, or else I call bullshit."

Jack looked down at the deck floor for a few seconds. A nervous frown appeared on his face as he slowly shook his head.

"I'm not sure if I can just do it like that."

Joel snickered.

"Yeah, I knew you were lying to me, Jack. Golly."

"No!" Jack exclaimed, grabbing Joel's arm as Joel turned to walk inside the house. "Joel, I'm not lying. I just—I don't know if I can do it on command. I tried earlier, but—"

Jack paused and sighed, briefly closing his eyes. He turned to look at a deck chair in the corner, his gaze locking onto it with intensity.

"Jack?" Joel said. "What are you doing—"

"Trying to focus on doing it, be quiet."

Jack extended his pointer finger towards the chair, his gaze locked on it, unblinking. *Lift up and fire! Lift up and fire! Lift up and fire!* In mere moments, the chair began to rise, hovering for a heartbeat before erupting into a fiery blaze.

"Well, hell's bells!" Joel said with widened eyes.

Before Jack could say a word, Joel rushed inside the house. A few seconds later, he rushed back onto the deck with a water pitcher. He quickly approached the chair that was still levitating in midair and doused the fire with the water, putting out the flames.

"What the hell, how did you *do* that, Jack?" Joel exclaimed, shaking his head in disbelief.

"I don't know," Jack said, his eyes widening. "This is—"

"*Telefuckingkinesis!*" Joel exclaimed. "Heavens to Betsy, you did *telekinesis!*"

As Jack quickly lowered his hand, the chair fell to the floor with a loud thud. Jack sighed heavily and briefly covered his face with his hands.

"Holy shit," Joel said with wide eyes. "Come on, Jack, be honest with me. How did you do that?"

Jack shook his head slowly, with a look of confusion on his face.

"I told you, I don't know," Jack said in a hushed tone. "I don't know; maybe it's some kind of—gift from God or something."

"Whoa, wait," Joel said with a wide smile, "do you realize what we could *accomplish* with an ability like telekinesis?"

Before Jack could reply, Joel's cellphone blared "Watermelon Crawl" by Tracy Byrd.

"Damn it," Joel said as he took his phone out of his holster and stared at the screen. "That's Amanda. I was supposed to be home thirty minutes ago. Her sister is bringing over her new boyfriend. Shit, I'm sorry, Jack."

"No, go on," Jack said in a low voice while still staring at the chair. "The last thing you need is Amanda jumping down your throat."

"Okay, but hey, look," Joel said while dashing over to the steps of the deck, "I'm going to call you tomorrow because I've already got like a *hundred* ideas of what we can do with this telekinesis shit!"

Jack sighed, rolled his eyes, and nodded.

"Yeah, I'll talk to you tomorrow," Jack replied, turning his back to Joel and staring at his yard.

As the sound of Joel's car faded away from the driveway, a wave of regret washed over Jack. He instantly wished he hadn't shared anything with Joel. The last thing he wanted was for Joel to take advantage of his newfound abilities, especially since Jack himself was still in the dark about why they had emerged. Shutting his eyes, he inhaled deeply, held his breath for a moment, and then released it slowly, trying to find some calm amidst the turmoil.

That evening, after washing the dishes, Jack left the kitchen. He was making his way up the stairs when he paused on the second step, gripping the railing tightly. A sharp pain shot through his chest, making him groan. As he heard loud chirping from above, he glanced at the ceiling. To his horror, he spotted four, long, black, bony, slimy creatures resembling giant ticks crawling into the corners.

Their eyes were enormous and solid black, and their mouths were gaped wide, revealing long, knife-like teeth. Their claws were sharp and menacing. Jack's eyes widened in disbelief; he thought he must have been imagining things. He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling a warmth wash over him. His legs became numb and tingly, and light perspiration streamed down the side of his face. As another wave of pain hit his chest, he yelled out and collapsed to the floor.

"Dad!" Noah shouted as he rushed down the stairs and ran over to his father. "Dad, what's wrong?"

Jack yelled out again, clutching his chest. His face was bright red, and every vein in his neck was visible.

"Get help, Noah!" Jack yelled between strained, gasping breaths. "Go to the living room and call Uncle Joel! *Quick!*"

"No, Dad, I can't leave you like this!" Noah hollered through sobs. "What's wrong?"

"Go!" Jack shouted, before letting out another anguished yell. "Go call him now! Hurry up and tell him to get here! Go!"

Jumping to his feet, Noah turned and dashed away. Jack rolled over on his stomach and rested his forehead on the floor before coughing up small amounts of blood.

"God, please," Jack whispered, tears filling his eyes. "Please don't let me die like this, not here on this floor."

Rolling over onto his back, Jack yelled again as he saw four tick-like parasite creatures kneeling around him; their faces just inches from his. He pressed his hands down on the floor, trying to move back

and away from the creatures, but it seemed as if his body was paralyzed. The pungent smell of sulfur emanating from the creatures made Jack nauseous, convincing him that the creatures were demons sent by Satan to snatch his soul. As the creatures made loud hissing sounds, Jack shut his eyes tight.

“He who dwells in the secret place of the most high shall abide under the shadow of the almighty,” Jack exclaimed tearfully. “I will say of the Lord, he is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust—”

Jack froze and his breath hitched in his throat as one of the creatures tightened its grip around his neck, choking him. Desperately, he clawed and pounded at the creature's hand, but it wouldn't relent, leaving Jack's face a perilous shade of blue. A piercing agony throbbed in his skull, and his lungs felt as if they were being scorched in a merciless blaze.

The creatures unleashed a deafening, resonating wail that seemed to shake the air around him. With fists clenched, Jack felt his surroundings dim as his eyes rolled back and the shadows of impending doom closed in. Just as his body began to succumb, he squeezed his eyes shut, surrendering to the darkness and slipping into oblivion.

Later that evening, Jack lay in bed with his eyes closed and a nasal cannula affixed to his nose. His brother, Joel, sat beside him, and Jack's other close friends sat nearby, all engaged in watching, waiting, and offering silent prayers. A nearby stereo played Jack's beloved gospel tune, “Hallelujah” by Marty Ray Project, on a soft loop.

Jack's complexion appeared unusually pale and was tinged with a blue discoloration; a telltale death rattle accompanied each labored breath. Tears welled in Noah's eyes as he entered the room, stopping just a few inches from Jack's bedside. It seemed as if Jack sensed his son's

presence because when he finally opened his eyes, he turned his head towards Noah, and a frown formed on his face.

"Son," Jack said in a low, weak voice, "come here and sit by me."

Wiping streaming tears away, Noah walked closer to Jack's bed and sat beside him. With a sad smile, Jack took hold of Noah's hand and kissed it.

"You are the *best* gift God *ever* gave me," Jack said tearfully.

"Always remember that, okay?"

Looking away from Jack, Noah broke into sobs that he tried so hard to contain but couldn't. After a few seconds, Noah looked back at him and nodded.

"I'm so sorry. I never wanted to leave you like this," Jack said with tears streaming. "Whenever you feel alone though, remember that I love you more than *anything* in this world and that I'm *always* with you."

"I love you too, Dad," Noah said through sobs, "but please don't die! I *need* you!"

As Noah rested his head on Jack's chest, embraced him in a hug, and sobbed loudly, Jack embraced him back and shed a few more tears of his own.

"Noah," Joel said tearfully while standing up and walking over to Noah, "it's going to be okay."

"No, it *won't*!" Noah shouted. "He can't die! He just *can't*!"

Before Joel could respond, Noah leaped off the bed and dashed out of the room.

"Noah, wait!" Joel yelled as he rushed to the room door.

"No," Jack said tearfully. "Let him be, Joel."

Rushing into his bedroom, Noah slammed the door and fell to the floor beside his bed. He clasped his hands together, closed his eyes, and broke into more sobs.

"God, please don't take my dad!" Noah prayed tearfully. "You promised that you wouldn't take him if he *believed* in you and had *faith*!"

He's all I have! Please don't take him! I *need* him!"

As Jack lay in bed, each inhalation sent jarring, piercing sensations coursing through his chest. He was acutely aware of the gravity of the situation, and with his fists clenched tightly, he fought desperately to stave off the inevitable, but it was futile. With every breath, his lungs constricted as though a tight cord was wrapped around them, relentlessly tightening its grip. A searing pain radiated through his head and chest, igniting a fiery turmoil within him that resulted in heavy beads of perspiration forming on his forehead. Each exhalation felt like a blaze in his throat, as if flames were licking his insides.

As he faintly frowned, he clutched the bedsheets tightly. His gaze fixed on the ceiling as his heart raced for a few moments before it began to slow down gradually. The frown deepened on his face, and a shiver ran through him as an icy chill seeped into every inch of his being. As he shut his eyes, Jack struggled to catch his breath, taking sharp inhales as Joel grasped his hand firmly.

Joel attempted to speak, but the words eluded him, leaving him to watch with tear filled eyes as Jack's gasping grew increasingly louder. After a brief silence, Jack released a long sigh, and with his eyes still closed, his head fell gently to the side. As Noah hurried back into his father's room, he stopped in the doorway and gazed with widened eyes at the heartbreaking scene before him.

His father lay motionless, with his hands lifeless by his side, while the sound of sobs filled the room from the people around Jack's bedside. At that moment, an intense burning sensation shot through Noah's body, causing his heart to race so fast that it felt like it was skipping beats. His legs turned to jelly, and within seconds, a heavy sweat broke out on his face as he sank to his knees, overwhelmed by the

emotional turmoil.

As Jack awakened, he slowly sat up in bed and was met with a sea of tear-streaked faces surrounding him. His gaze landed on his son, who was on his knees, overcome with sobs. Jack's furrowed brows and teary eyes conveyed the depth of his emotions as he looked at his son. At that moment, he felt a powerful tug in the pit of his stomach and a sharp pang in his chest.

Strangely, it was as if he could feel the raw intensity of his son's anguish and grief. However, just as suddenly as it had come, the heaviness lifted, and a surge of energy coursed through him, leaving him feeling revitalized, almost like a child on Christmas morning. *Wait, does this mean that I'm still alive?* As Jack looked down at his arms, hands, and legs, now glowing with a ghostly transparency, the realization hit him with startling clarity.

He was indeed dead, yet in that moment, he found himself in a new existence, transformed into a radiant, ethereal soul. Suddenly, a brilliant, spiraling tunnel of white light appeared a few feet away, captivating him with dazzling allure. Rising from his bed, he frowned and squinted at the enchanting tunnel, feeling an overwhelming sense of relaxation wash over him.

It was as if an invisible force wrapped around him in a soothing embrace, filling him with a euphoric warmth that resonated through every part of his being. As the tunnel shifted into a vibrant array of colors, waves of pulsating, intense pleasure surged through him, amplifying his ethereal experience.

"Oh my God, it's so *beautiful*," Jack whispered as he slowly stepped towards the tunnel.

Jack stopped when a woman, standing five feet three inches tall with shoulder-length brown hair and brown eyes, emerged from the tunnel. She was dressed in a white gown and enveloped in a bright, golden glow. Instantly, Jack recognized her as Joanna, his late wife, and

Noah's mother. As tears filled his eyes, Joanna approached and gently took hold of his hands.

"Joanna," Jack said in a low, tearful voice. "I can't believe it's you! God, I've missed you so much."

Joanna smiled as she caressed the side of Jack's face.

"I've missed you too," she replied in a low, echoing voice before kissing him softly on the lips. "I've been waiting for you for so long. It's time to come home. Are you ready?"

As tears streamed from his eyes, Jack's smile slowly faded. He looked down at the floor with a deep frown.

"I really don't want to leave Noah, Joanna," Jack said in a low, tearful whisper. "No, I—I can't leave him. If you could just let me go back and be with him for—"

Joanna smiled at him, then frowned briefly.

"Jack, no," Joanna interjected, "you won't be leaving him for long."

"No, Joanna, he *needs* me," Jack said with tears clouding his eyes. "I *promised* him I'd be there for him. Please—"

"Jack," Joanna cut in, "no—"

"Please—"

"*Jack!*" Joanna shouted, "I *promise* you'll see him again soon, but you *have* to come with me now. You *have* to."

Jack sighed deeply, his hand moving to wipe away the relentless tears that blurred his vision. Despite Joanna's heartfelt promise, the very thought of stepping into the beckoning tunnel of light filled him with an overwhelming sense of apprehension. It was as if every fiber of his ethereal existence was screaming in protest, urging him to stay back, to resist the call of the unknown.

Yet, amidst the turmoil of his emotions and the instinctive fear of the journey ahead, there remained one unwavering beacon of trust—his wife, Joanna. It was in her assurances and her unwavering faith that Jack found the strength to quell his doubts. In that moment of uncertainty

and fear, he chose to lean on that trust, allowing it to guide his next steps.

“Fine,” Jack said with a hint of sadness. “If I have to, then—let’s go.”

While kneeling, Noah’s sobs intensified, overwhelmed by pain, grief, and a profound sense of betrayal directed at the deity he had prayed to for his father’s sake. His sobbing was so vehement that his complexion reddened, accompanied by a sharp, piercing headache that swirled around in his head. What Noah had just experienced would herald not just an era of sorrow for him but also a series of tragedies.

CHAPTER TWO

August Cameron, just seven years old, spat out his water after brushing his teeth and bolted from the bathroom. He raced back into his bedroom, clad in his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles pajamas and slippers, but froze as he heard a sinister whisper drifting through the open window.

“August,” hissed a voice, raspy and chilling.

August turned towards the window with a furrowed brow, noticing his white Mickey Mouse curtains fluttering ominously in the night breeze. As he approached, his heart dropped. Lurking behind the bushes across the street were glowing red eyes, watching him intently. Suddenly, an eight-foot-tall, green praying mantis emerged; its slanted, crimson eyes fixed on him, a grotesque grin stretching across its face, revealing long, jagged teeth stained with something dark and sinister. The creature raised a spindly arm and waved, and in that moment, terror seized August. He screamed and fled the room.

“Mommy!” August shouted, racing down the hallway. “Mommy, help! There’s a monster outside my window!”

As he barreled down the stairs, he skidded to a halt, gasping in horror. A towering figure loomed in front of him—a nine-foot-tall man draped in a Greek toga. His presence radiated an ancient, unsettling power. White hair and a beard adorned with glinting golden rings framed a face that was both regal and terrifying. His white scaly covered skin shimmered under the dim light, and gold cuffs etched with cryptic Sumerian symbols encircled his arms, enhancing his menacing aura. The man leaned closer, a wicked smile curling his lips, and as he brought his face near, August felt his breath quicken and his heart race

uncontrollably. He was frozen, unable to escape. The man whispered incomprehensible words into August's ear while behind him eerie symbols flickered in the air:

[illegible]

A sinister chuckle escaped the man's lips as he recoiled, then plunged his hand deep into August's chest. A surge of excruciating, burning pain erupted *within August, and his scream reverberated through the house—*



In the dead of night, in the bedroom of his Chesterfield, Virginia home, thirty-nine-year-old August jolted upright in bed with a loud gasp. His eyes were wide and flooded with tears, and his face glistened with perspiration. He squeezed his eyes shut and took deep, shuddering inhaling and exhaling breaths, attempting to still his pounding heart. This nightmare, a vivid reenactment of a terrifying ordeal from his childhood, was not a new visitor in his nocturnal torments. Indeed, August had been haunted by this harrowing memory more times than he could count.

Yet, with each visitation, the mystery of why this bone-chilling event from his past refused to release its grip on him deepened, leaving him to wonder why he was cursed to repeatedly face this dark specter of his past. He grabbed his bottled water off the nightstand table and guzzled before stopping as a breeze blew past his left arm. He took the water bottle from his mouth and shot his widened eyes over at his open curtained window but saw nothing but the woods and the house next door to him. He sighed with a brief close of his eyes.

"Relax, August," he whispered, "relax and go back to sleep."

He turned over and lay down on his side, and within a few minutes, he found himself drifting back to sleep again, off to dreaming about another memory—



On a somber day draped in the dull, gray hues of an overcast sky, August, at the tender age of eight, found himself engulfed in a sorrow so deep it seemed endless. His best friend, a golden retriever named Cooper, had passed away. Cooper wasn't just a pet; he was August's confidant, his guardian through the night's darkness. August sat on the cold ground of his mother's backyard in front of Cooper's grave, with tears flooding his eyes.

That backyard was where he and Cooper spent countless hours chasing the sun, playing fetch, and simply basking in each other's company. Now, all that remained was a void, a silence too heavy for his young heart to bear. Lowering his head, August sobbed uncontrollably, his small body heaving with each wave of grief that crashed over him. Victoria, August's mother, knelt beside him, her arms enveloping him in a warm embrace.

"Cooper will always be with us, August. In here," she said, gently placing a hand over his heart. "He'll forever watch over us, I promise."

Amidst the cacophony of his own sobs, August began to hear a strange sound—a series of soft, rhythmic clicking noises that seemed to surround him. It was as if a thousand crickets were all around the backyard. He looked up with tearful eyes, searching for the source of the sound, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. The backyard, with its familiar trees and the swing set he no longer had the heart to play on, offered no clues. Victoria was oblivious to the eerie clicking. Her focus was solely on her son and on trying to mend the pieces of his broken spirit. Unbeknown to both August and Victoria, August was being

observed by entities and a malevolent deity unseen, entities and a malevolent deity that existed just beyond the veil of human perception. These entities and the deity were drawn to the loosh energy intensity of August's grief and were feeding off of every second of it.

As the entire backyard exploded into a bright, white light, the dream changed to another memory. This memory was of a Friday evening. It consisted of thirty-six-year-old August Cameron filling his cup with coffee. While doing so, he was humming along to the smooth sounds of one of his favorite songs—The Brothers Johnson's "Strawberry Letter 23" drifting from the kitchen radio in his Chesterfield, Virginia home. August opened a cabinet to retrieve a bottle of Latour wine, placing it carefully into a nearby picnic basket.

With the basket in hand, he made his way to the garage, setting it down in the back seat of his Toyota Highlander. Just as August was about to head back inside, he paused, briefly closing his eyes to recall his picnic blanket. Moving to a shelf behind his vehicle, he spotted the blanket perched on the top tier, well out of reach of his six-foot-two frame. August fetched a stepladder and positioned it in front of the shelf, ready to climb, when something caught his eye—a dusty, framed photograph of his teenage self with his mother, Victoria, hidden behind his toolbox. The sight of the photo transported him back to the summer after he graduated from high school, the last time he ever spoke to her—

In the living room of his mother's Sterling, Virginia home, August paced back and forth, his face reddened from the fierce argument he was currently engaged in with his mother.

"I just can't believe you, August!" Victoria shouted. "VCU! VCU over Liberty University, a good, clean Christian university—"

"Mom, it's my choice," August replied, "or at least it's supposed to be—"

"It's your choice whether or not to attend a school that is

founded on the principles and morals of God? August, I didn't raise you to be like this! I raised you to be a strong, fire-baptized believer in the Lord. I had big plans for you to become a minister, yet you're turning away from God? I—I just can't believe you."

August rolled his eyes and sighed.

"Mom, those are your plans, not mine."

"They're good plans, August—"

"No, they're not! They're plans that consist of you wanting to experience life through my choices!" August responded; frustration evident in his voice. "And I'm done with it! You aspired to be a minister, and you achieved that—good for you! But that's your path, not mine! I have my own dreams, and I refuse to keep clinging to the illusion of Christianity as if it were my own reality!"

Victoria shook her head and turned her back to him.

"My lord, I don't know where I screwed up in creating you, I declare—"

August stared at her with widened eyes and a deep frown, unsure if he actually heard what he thought he did from her.

"Creating me?" he said before shaking his head and laughing angrily. "What the hell? Oh my god—Mom, see, that's just it! I'm not one of your damn art projects that you work on in your basement—"

"Oh, you know what I mean, August—"

"No, I don't—"

"August, please stop this!" Victoria shouted. "Why are you doing this? Why are you doing this to me, to God?"

August looked away and blinked back tears, hesitant to discuss his disdain for God with his mother, who appeared eager to delve into it.

"Why did God do this to me, Mom?" August replied, his voice breaking with emotion. "I grew up wanting a father so bad but not having one because, according to you, God thought it would be better for you to raise me on your own and for me not to know what it was like

to have a father in my life! I went through ten years of bullying in school, bullying to the point where I'd come home and pray for God to make it stop, and he wouldn't! There were times when the bullying was so bad I tried to take my own life! The bullying was so traumatizing that it became the reason why, to this day, sometimes, I feel like—like I'm not good enough for anyone or anything! All that happened under the God I used to serve, the God I would pray to every night!"

"August—"

"No!" August shouted. "You need to hear this because it seems you can't understand why someone would hate your god! He took away every family member who ever meant anything to you or me! The family members who believed in him, worshiped him, and dedicated their lives to him—what did he do to them in return? He took their lives! Yet, the family members who live their lives contrary to everything he and his Bible speak about, who don't care about you or me, he let them live! The many days and nights we used to spend in storage facilities because we didn't want to sleep on the streets! Remember that? We fasted, begged, and prayed for God to help us! And yeah, he did; he helped us get off the streets and into a new apartment.

Every two months though, we had to constantly move because we kept getting evicted because you could never find a job! So, you wonder why I hate God and his Christianity? That's why! Every time we needed God, he was never there for us, and he took everyone who mattered away from us, so yeah, I hate him! The hell with him!"

In a swift motion, August spun around, clenching his fists tightly and squeezing his eyes shut, desperately attempting to suppress the flood of emotions he had kept hidden for far too long. However, his efforts proved futile. Almost immediately, he found himself biting his lower lip as soft sobs began to escape from him, revealing the vulnerability he had tried so hard to conceal.

"August," Victoria said in a low, tearful voice, "if you don't stop

your hate against God, and if you don't go to Liberty, I'm making this vow right here and right now that I will cut you off in every way, including when it comes to being in my life."

August turned back around and stared at her with raised eyebrows and widened eyes.

"What did you say?" he asked in a low, tearful voice.

Victoria nodded while wiping streaming tears away.

"You heard me," she replied, "if you turn against God, then I don't ever want to speak to you again."

"You'd do that?" he asked, "you'd turn against me, your son—for God?"

"In a heartbeat," she tearfully replied, refusing to look at him. "God comes first in my life, and I won't continue to have a son who's a blasphemer in my life."

Looking down and nodding, August frowned and blinked repeatedly as more tears clouded his eyes. He felt a sudden, sharp pain shoot across his chest. It was the pain of heartbreak.

"Fine," he replied with a quivering voice. "Goodbye, Mother. I'll pack up and be out of your house by tonight."

Before Victoria could utter another word, August stormed out of the living room—

Tears filled his eyes as August gazed at the framed picture of himself and his mother. After taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly, he wiped away his streaming tears. With a heavy sigh, he tossed the photo behind the toolbox, determined not to let the painful memory spoil the special evening he had planned.

He pushed the stepladder as close to the shelf as possible and climbed two steps, only to be struck by the sudden image of a large, white, glowing Om symbol, causing him to halt and furrow his brow in confusion. Moments later, he felt his feet lift off the ladder, before

floating in midair away from it. With a deep frown, he glanced down at his feet, then at the ladder, and finally at the floor. His eyes widened slightly in disbelief.

“What the hell?” August whispered. Am I hallucinating?

As August looked behind him, his body swiveled while still in the air. He gasped as his eyes grew wider.

“Okay, okay!” August said in a slightly cracked, high-pitched voice while shutting his eyes tight. “Calm down, you’re hallucinating, August; that’s it. Just calm down and relax. Just imagine your feet are on the floor, and they will be. They have to be because this isn’t happening. It isn’t!”

August opened his eyes and found his feet back on the floor. He furrowed his brow and blinked repeatedly, trying to make sense of what had just happened. It seemed like a hallucination to him. He quickly climbed up the ladder, grabbed the blanket, and hurriedly climbed back down, afraid of experiencing the same thing again. His wife, Samantha, who was nine months pregnant, walked in and hugged him from behind.

“I’m home, handsome,” she said, smiling. “Happy anniversary.”

Closing his eyes briefly, he exhaled slowly, smiled, and turned to face her. He embraced her, sharing a passionate kiss before smiling again.

“Happy anniversary to you too, beautiful. Everything is ready in the car, and we’re all set to go.”

“You promise we’re not going to your mother’s place for dinner or something?” Samantha asked.

August looked away with a brow raised.

“Uh—no, I’ve been calling all week, and she keeps not responding as usual.”

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry,” Samantha said, hugging him closer. “So, we’re going to my parents’ house then?”

“Oh, hell no,” August said with a frown and a smirk before

shaking his head.

“Cameron!” Samantha said, smiling and playfully hitting his arm, which made him laugh.

“I meant that in a good way, I promise,” August said, smiling.

Samantha rolled her eyes at him, smiled, and walked away.

“Well, where are we going then?” Samantha asked. “At least give me a little hint—”

“It’s a surprise,” August answered. “It’s a place very special to both of us, I promise. So, if you’re ready, let’s go. Come on—”

“Okay, okay, I’m ready,” Samantha said, smiling as she hurried to the front passenger side of the Highlander.

It took an hour for August to reach Virginia Beach. He turned off the engine, got out, and helped Samantha, who was blindfolded, out of the car.

“Cameron, since we’re already here, don’t you think I can remove the blindfold now?” Samantha asked as August grabbed the picnic basket from the car’s back seat and then led her towards the beach boardwalk.

“No, not yet. It’s a surprise. You just have to wait,” August said as he led her onto the beach. “Okay, stay right there. Don’t move, and don’t take off your blindfold either.”

Quickly, August rushed away from her.

“Cameron—”

“Just wait, babe, hold on,” August said as he rushed back over to her and stepped behind her.

“Cameron, if we’re at some cheesy restaurant, I swear I’m going to be pissed,” Samantha said before laughing.

“Nope,” August replied, smiling as he removed her blindfold.

“Where we are is where we first met.”

Samantha was amazed to see a large heart made of red candles on the beach, with a blanket and picnic basket in the center.

"Oh my God, August, this is where we first met," Samantha said in a soft voice with tearful eyes.

"Yup," he replied, smiling and wrapping his arms around her from behind. "Twenty-one years ago, on this night, I met the girl, who's now a woman, that I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with."

Turning to face him, she embraced him as tears streamed. Pulling him closer, she kissed him softly on the lips.

"This is the sweetest anniversary gift you have ever given me," she said. "This is why I love you so much."

August smiled softly as he gazed deeply into her eyes.

"Samantha, you're the first light of my mornings and the sweetest thought that lingers in my mind at night. You're my breath, my dearest friend, and my anchor. After sharing these twenty-one wonderful years with you, I can't wait to embrace the next twenty-one by your side because you're the one who will forever hold the key to my heart."

Samantha looked away while breaking into light sobs before pulling him close and hugging him.

"Oh baby, that was the most romantic thing you've said to me. I love you too, forever and always."

She leaned back and kissed him with intense passion, igniting an emotional fire within both of them. As they finally separated, he looked at her with raised eyebrows and a smile.

"Well, I guess we're just skipping dinner and going straight to dessert then, huh?" August asked before sharing a laugh with Samantha.

"Pretty much," Samantha said with a smirk. "We can have dinner later. Right now, I have an appetite for something else. I mean, if that's all right with you?"

"Oh hell yeah, you don't have to ask me twice," August said,

quickly picking her up in his arms, which made her laugh.

As they stepped onto the soft blanket, he gently laid her down before settling beside her, enveloping her in his embrace as their lips met in a tender kiss. She responded by encircling him with her arms while he caressed her left thigh, guiding her leg to rest around his waist. Her heart raced, and her breath became shallow as his warm hands glided over her skin, igniting a fire within her that caused a soft sound to escape her lips. Right then, her eyes widened in surprise, and she gasped, instinctively pushing him away.

“Cameron, stop!” Samantha shouted.

“Why? What’s wrong?” August asked with a brow raised.

She shut her eyes, frowned, and then angrily yelled.

“Damn it, my water broke!” she exclaimed.

“What?” August shouted. “Wait, are you sure? I mean, you’re sure it’s not just you being excited and aroused—”

“No—yes, I’m sure! Look at my skirt!”

August glanced down at her skirt and the blanket underneath her, his eyes widening as he saw they were almost soaked with water.

“Oh!” August shouted with a deep frown. “Oh—okay, okay, um—damn it! What do we do?”

She shook her head with a breathed laugh.

“The hospital, Cameron, we have to get to the hospital.”

Closing his eyes, he frowned, shook his head, and nodded.

“Right, yeah—that’s right! Oh—damn it, the labor bag’s at home! Damn it, I knew I should’ve kept it in the car—”

“No,” Samantha cut in as August helped her get to her feet. “It’s fine; let’s just get to the hospital now, come on. I—”

She stopped and let out a loud yell while kneeling over.

“Oh!” she shouted. “Cameron, we’ve got to hurry! The contractions are starting!”

August hurriedly blew out every lit candle.

“Okay, okay, we’re going, come on,” he said as he took her by the hand and rushed towards the boardwalk.

August drove sixty-five miles per hour, disregarding everything but the urgency of getting his wife to Bon Secours St. Francis Medical Center. Upon arriving, Samantha, in pain, hurried out of the car and did loud breathing exercises. As they reached the ER doorway, she stopped and grabbed August's hand and squeezed it tightly while screaming, causing him to yell out in pain.

“Damn it!” August shouted with widened eyes as he yanked his hand away from her. “Jesus Christ, Samantha!”

She clutched the ER doors and screamed again while he grimaced at his hand, now nearly blood-red. Intense, throbbing pain surged through each finger, leading him to wonder how she hadn’t broken every bone in his hand.

“Oh my god, she’s in labor!” a female nurse exclaimed as she ran over to August and Samantha.

“Gee, ya think?” August snapped while shaking his left hand repeatedly.

The nurse raised a brow at him and frowned.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Look, we need to get her to the delivery room, or else she’s going to be giving birth right here in the doorway.”

“Okay, okay, come on, dear,” the nurse said as she grabbed Samantha’s hand and hurriedly ushered her to a nearby wheelchair.

It was nearly an hour later as Samantha lay in a hospital bed with her legs open and in stirrups, surrounded by August, an older male doctor, and two female nurses.

“Okay,” the doctor said while standing with the nurses at the end of the bed and in between Samantha’s legs, “now, I need you to start

pushing, okay?"

Samantha nodded while breathing heavily.

"Okay, I'm not a professional pusher, but I'll give it my best shot," she joked as August laughed.

"You can do this, honey," August said, rubbing her back. "I'm right here with you, okay?"

She nodded, looked up at him, smiled, and kissed him quickly.

"Okay," the doctor said, "here we go. One, two, three, push!"

Samantha leaned forward and let out a loud yell as she pushed hard.

"Good, keep pushing! Keep pushing!" the doctor shouted.

After a few minutes, Samantha let out another loud yell as the doctor raised his hand.

"Okay, stop!" the doctor shouted. "Breathe!"

With a deep exhale, Samantha reclined on the bed and closed her eyes for a moment. August gently kissed her on the forehead.

"You're doing great, sweetheart."

"Thanks," she replied with a smile, "but I'm telling you right now, Cameron, we are never having sex again."

"Oh yeah, definitely," he said with a wink and a nod before laughing, causing her to playfully hit his arm and laugh.

"Did you call my parents and my brother?" she asked.

August nodded.

"Yeah, I got their voicemails, but I left messages telling them to get here as soon as possible."

Samantha nodded, but then, seconds later, she moaned while frowning and clutching her chest, something of which August took notice of.

"What's wrong?" August asked with a brow raised.

"I—I just felt a sharp pain in my chest."

August shot his eyes up at the doctor.

"Hey, she's having chest pain. Is that normal?"

The doctor rushed over to Samantha.

"Samantha, when did the pain start?"

Letting out a slow, loud exhale, Samantha blinked twice.

"Just a few seconds ago, but I'm fine. I'll be fine."

The doctor squinted and frowned at her, then glanced back at the ECG machine before nodding at her.

"Sometimes a minor chest ache during delivery can be normal," the doctor said in a low voice.

"Yeah, of course," she said while glancing over at August, who stared at her with a deep frown that let her know he was worried.

Lifting his right hand, she kissed it.

"I'll be fine, honey, I promise," she said with a smile. "It's just a symptom of childbirth, that's all."

August momentarily closed his eyes, taking a slow, deliberate breath. He nodded in a semblance of understanding, yet his expression was immediately clouded with doubt. A subtle frown creased his forehead, his head gave a slight shake, and he absentmindedly rubbed his tongue against the inside of his cheek, signaling an internal conflict. Despite trying to reassure himself, a deep-seated unease lingered. He recalled witnessing his aunt's labor; none of her symptoms had included chest pain. This memory clashed with his current worry, as he was acutely aware that Samantha, unlike his aunt, had been born with a heart condition, adding layers of complexity and concern to the situation.

"Samantha, please let me know if the chest pains become severe, okay?" the doctor said with raised eyebrows. "I'm serious, all right?"

"Yeah," Samantha replied while nodding, "I promise."

"Okay, it's time to push again," the doctor said as he rushed back to the end of the bed with the nurses. "Okay, push!"

Samantha leaned forward and yelled as she pushed again.

"Push hard and keep pushing!" the doctor yelled.

Letting out another yell, Samantha leaned forward even more while pushing.

“Good! Keep pushing! Keep pushing!” the doctor shouted. “We can almost see the head!”

“He’s almost here, babe. Keep going. You’re doing great!” August said with a smile.

Samantha shut her eyes and displayed a deep frown, her face turning red. Her heart rate on the ECG machine raced fast, and immediately, she shot open her eyes and widened them while letting out a long, loud gasp.

“Samantha, what’s wrong? What’s wrong?” August asked with widened eyes.

Clutching her chest, Samantha gasped repeatedly before rolling her eyes back and dropping onto the bed. Her heart rate on the ECG machine raced faster as she began seizing.

“Oh my God! Oh my God, Samantha?” August shouted with wide eyes. “What’s happening to her? What’s happening?”

“She’s suffering a cardiac arrest!” the doctor shouted as he ran to Samantha’s side.

“No!” August shouted as tears clouded his eyes. “No!”

One of the nurses seized August by the arm and dragged him away from the bed.

“Mr. Cameron, please wait outside until we find out what’s going on!”

“What! No!” August shouted while pushing the nurse away. “I’m not going anywhere! She’s having a heart attack!”

“Jill, get me the defibrillator! Now!” the doctor yelled.

“Got it, doctor!” the female nurse responded as she ushered August towards the double doors of the delivery room. “Mr. Cameron, please, if you want us to help her, wait outside!”

Before August could say another word, the female nurse pushed

him out into the hallway.

"Code blue, code blue, code blue," a female voice said on the hospital intercom.

August froze in front of the double doors as tears flowed from his eyes. He watched as a flurry of nurses and doctors rushed into the delivery room. Weakness mixed with an overwhelming heat made his legs tremble, feeling as though flames engulfed him. His heart raced violently as if it threatened to burst out of his chest. The haunting image of Samantha lying in a coffin flashed through his mind, which made him start pacing before he gave in to quiet sobs.

"Please," August said in a low, tearful voice, "someone, anyone listening up there, please don't take her, please, please, please."

He slammed his back against the wall, then dropped to the floor, rested his head in his hands, and closed his eyes. Despite no longer identifying as a Christian since his late high school years, he prayed anyway.

"Please, God, if by some chance you are real and you're listening to me, I'm begging you, please don't take her," he said in a low voice before breaking into more light sobs. "Please don't let her die, please! Please! I'll—I'll go back to being a Christian again if you let her live, please."

Loud chirping startled August, making him rush to his feet and look around frantically. Then, the delivery room doors opened, and the doctor approached with a grave look, instantly alarming August.

"No," August said with tearful eyes and a frown while shaking his head and backing away from the doctor. "No, no, no—"

"Mr. Cameron, I'm—I'm so sorry," the doctor said in a low voice.

"No, no!" August shouted at the top of his lungs tearfully. "Samantha!"

August hurried past the doctor and dashed towards the double doors of the delivery room.

"Samantha!" August yelled, his face bright red and his neck veins visible.

"Mr. Cameron, I'm sorry, but she's gone!" the doctor yelled while grabbing August from behind and pulling him away from the door.

"No, no, let me go, damn it! Samantha!" August continued yelling. "Samantha! Saman—"

August stopped and dropped to his knees, sobbing loudly and uncontrollably while the doctor consoled him.

As a white light exploded in the hospital hallway, the dream switched to another memory, one of August arriving home later that night. He stood in the hallway, staring at the dark emptiness that now filled every crevice of the home he shared with his wife. As tears filled his eyes, he walked upstairs to his bedroom. As August sat on the side of his bed, the weight of despair pressed down on him like a heavy shroud. In his trembling hand, he held his Ruger LCP II handgun, its cold metal glinting dimly in the low light while tears streamed from his ocean blue eyes, blurring the world around him.

Just that morning, laughter had filled the walls of that bedroom, but now it lay silent, a hollow echo of what once was. He sighed and squeezed the gun tighter in his hands. With a faint frown, his heart ached with the unbearable absence of his wife, the love of his life who had slipped away into the night, leaving him adrift in a sea of sorrow. With a gasp, he quickly pressed the gun firmly under his chin and shut his eyes tight with a deeper frown. Immediately, he felt his heart skip beats, and a surge of heat seeped into every crevice of his body. As more tears streamed from his closed eyes, he pulled the trigger, and despite hearing the gun click, it failed to fire. He pulled the trigger again, but once again, it didn't fire.

He tried a third time and then a fourth, but each time, the gun failed to fire. Each click was a cruel reminder of his isolation and an act of stubborn refusal to fulfill the desperate wish that clawed at his insides. With haste, he pointed the gun at the wall in front of him and pulled the trigger. The loud sound of the weapon firing made August jump. His eyes widened as he stared at the large hole that was in the wall. He frowned and slightly shook his head as he opened the chamber of the gun and saw nine bullets still left inside.

Closing the chamber, August pressed the gun firmly to the right side of his temple and pulled the trigger, but once again, the gun refused to fire. He pulled the trigger a second time and then a third, but each time ended in failure. In a fit of rage, he yelled at the top of his lungs while hurling the gun across the room, the metallic clang echoing like a scream in the stillness.

Then, the dam broke. As he dropped down onto the bed, he broke into loud, uncontrollable sobs. For August's entire life, his uncle—who had been his primary, though sometimes inconsistent, father figure—had his voice as a constant, rigid anchor in his mind. His uncle's "boys and real men don't cry" rule had been drilled into him from the time he was old enough to walk. His uncle had been a man of iron and silence, a man who believed that tears were a biological defect in a male.

To August's uncle, a man who wept was a "sissy," a "weakling" who lacked the spine to face the world. He had taught August that real men swallowed their poison in private and wore a mask of granite in public. Any display of emotional distress was seen as a shameful surrender, a sign that you were fundamentally broken. But as August lay there, he didn't care about the rule.

He couldn't care. The grief for Samantha wasn't something he could manage or stoically endure; it was an involuntary, primal impulse that tore through his defenses before he could even think to raise them.

The conditioning of a lifetime was simply incinerated by the heat of his heartbreak. He felt like a man torn apart by a world that had once again turned dark and cold towards him. Worse still, he found himself without anyone to turn to for comfort. Years had passed since he last spoke to his mother. Most of his friends didn't answer their phones, and those who did failed to offer words that could ease his grief. Thus, he was all alone, and the weight of that loneliness threatened to swallow him whole. In that moment, he understood the depth of his despair, a chasm so deep that he could see no way out—



For the second time that night, August shot up in bed, gasping loudly, with tearful eyes. Sweat glistened his face, and his breaths came heavily. Three years had passed since the death of Samantha, yet the recurring dreams of the night he lost her and their son persisted. As August closed his eyes, the doctor's voice echoed in his ears, and he vividly remembered the doctor's words about their child's fate. *I'm so sorry, but the baby's umbilical cord strangled him around his neck. We attempted neonatal CPR, but—it was just too late.*

Opening his eyes, now refilled with tears, August rose from the bed, walked to the open window in his room, leaned against the window sill, and gazed up at the moon. Despite his limited knowledge, August firmly believed in paranormal theories regarding the moon and reincarnation, convincing himself that Samantha and his son were being held there, awaiting reincarnation.

Closing his eyes tightly, he immediately considered using astral projection to attempt to reach his wife. Although he had tried astral projection a few times before, it was only to create a blissful realm he could escape to whenever he wanted to escape from his current reality for a few hours. He had never used astral projection to try to reach

someone who had passed away because he didn't know if it could even be done. As August walked to his bed and settled onto his back, he took a deep breath and gently closed his eyes.

He focused on staying perfectly still, and soon he felt a tingling sensation throughout his body. After a few minutes, his translucent figure rose from the bed. Taking in the surroundings, August couldn't help but furrow his brow. He glanced at his transparent hands and smiled briefly at their ethereal appearance. With a sigh, he closed his eyes, uncertain of what to do next or how to find Samantha. But he decided to visualize the moon in his mind, hoping it would guide him. As the image of the moon materialized, he suddenly found himself in a vibrant, aquarium-themed bedroom with colorful Legos scattered across the floor. Looking around, he raised a brow and pondered the new setting with curiosity.

"Where in the hell am I?" August whispered, urgency lacing his hushed tone.

As he heard laughter behind him, August turned, raised his brows, and widened his eyes, surprised to find a little boy in denim overalls with short, curly brown hair and big, bright brown eyes running out of a nearby bathroom. Not noticing August, the boy passed straight through him and fell to the floor with two GI Joe action figures in his hands.

When August walked over and knelt beside him, attempting to touch the boy, his hand passed right through. August looked puzzled as he frowned. The situation didn't make sense. Having knowledge of astral projection, August knew others in the astral realm could always see someone undergoing it. However, the little boy seemed completely unaware of his presence. *Why can't he see me?*

"Because I've made it so that he can't see or interact with you in any way," a built, seven-foot-tall, white-haired, olive-complexioned man dressed in all black said in a low voice from behind August.

August stood up, turned around, and squinted at the man.

“Why?”

“I have my reasons,” the man responded coldly with a mischievous smirk while shrugging.

“Who *are* you?” August asked in an icy, aggressive tone while staring the man up and down.

The man glanced away for a few seconds and then smiled.

“You can call me—*Sakla*.”

August briefly looked back at the little boy.

“Who is this little boy—*Sakla*? Is he some—older version of my son or something?”

“It’s Samantha.”

August turned his head back to *Sakla* with a frown and a raised brow.

“What?”

“I said he’s Samantha,” *Sakla* said with a mocking smile. “It’s too late to get to her, August.”

August’s heart pounded as he blinked rapidly, struggling to grasp what he had heard.

“What do you mean it’s Samantha? First of all, Samantha is a *female*, and secondly, Samantha is an *adult*. This little boy is a *child*—”

“Samantha has been reincarnated into the body of a little boy this time. You’ll *never* see her again. Accept it; she’s gone, she’s never coming back, she’s finished. There’s not a remaining *trace* of her left in the universe.”

As *Sakla* chuckled, August let out a rough, loud breath and shook his head slowly, tears filling his eyes.

“No, no, you’re—you’re *lying*!”

Sakla rushed over to August, grabbed his arm, and yanked him hard down to the floor, close to the little boy, resulting in August falling to his knees.

"Am I, IS-BE?" Sakla shouted in a disembodied, demonic voice before quickly waving his hand in front of the little boy's ankle.

Immediately, a faint, dark brown, heart-shaped birthmark appeared on the little boy's ankle, causing August to frown deeper and repeatedly blink as tears streamed.

"Oh my God," August said in a low, tearful voice.

"Aww, no need to call on me, August. I'm already *here*," Sakla said in a raspy, sinister, cold tone while displaying an evil smirk. "Now, I *know* you remember this. It's your *wife's* birthmark. It *remained* with her as she was *zapped* into her next *incarnation!*"

August closed his eyes and shook his head with wildness. Despite seeing the proof that Sakla was right, that the little boy in front of him was indeed his wife reincarnated, he refused to let himself believe it. He just *couldn't*.

"No, no, you're lying," August said tearfully. "You're *lying!* You—you *have* to be!"

Sakla let out a terrifying grunt as he seized August by the back of his shirt and forcefully slammed him against the wall. August yelled out before collapsing onto the floor. As he was about to get up, Sakla lunged at him, grabbed his neck, and lifted him off the floor. He firmly pressed August against the wall, with his hand still tightly squeezed around August's throat.

August gasped and his face flushed red as he fought to breathe while frantically clawing at Sakla's hands in a desperate attempt to free himself, but his struggles were in vain. August immediately felt his heart racing, his stomach cramped severely, his hands became cold and clammy, and his legs grew weak and shaky. He couldn't understand why, but extreme fear filled every part of his body and soul. Sakla's rotten, sulfur-like smell reached August's nose, making him swallow hard to keep from vomiting. As Sakla leaned closer to August's face, he laughed.

"You IS-BEs who have *no* idea who I am *never* fail to amuse me,"

Sakla remarked in a low, resonant voice, a wicked grin spreading across his face.

Sakla closed his eyes, leaned closer to August, and sniffed him loudly and slowly.

“Mmm! I can *smell* the fear inside you! It’s *delicious!*” Sakla said before licking his lips with his long, black, forked tongue and then laughing demonically.

Tears welled up in August’s eyes as he grimaced, feeling intense pressure swirling in his head. He felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his chest.

“Who—who are you—really?” August asked, struggling to breathe with a quivering voice.

“I am *everything* that ever *was* and everything that ever will be!” Sakla proclaimed, his eyes wide with a frenzied intensity, each word laden with a sinister gravity. “I am the dark *phantoms* that invade the nightmares of every soul on earth. I am the *countless* deities to whom they *turn* to in their desperation, casting their prayers into the abyss each *night!* I am their deepest *fears*, their suffocating *hopelessness*, their insatiable *desires*, their seething *jealousy*, their primal instincts, their unrestrained *rage*, their chaotic *violence!* I am both the creator and the harbinger of their *darkest realities!*”

August’s eyes widened in horror as he looked up, witnessing the bedroom transform into a bleak abyss, a scorched shell of charred walls and smoldering debris. The innocent image of the little boy vanished into nothingness. Sinister occult symbols and ancient Sumerian glyphs writhed and contorted, etching themselves onto every surface, as if the very essence of darkness had taken possession of the room.

The grip of Sakla’s fingers tightened around August’s throat, each constricting squeeze drawing the breath from his lungs, leaving him gasping and desperate. As the pressure mounted, darkness crept into the corners of his vision, and he squeezed his eyes shut, hoping to escape the horror unfolding before him. Sakla’s eyes transformed into a

glowing white luminescence that ignited within. With a slow, deliberate motion, he raised his hand, which blazed with a fierce red glow, crackling with streaks of yellow lightning that danced like evil spirits. August's heart raced, tears spilled from his eyes, and terror flooded his senses as he opened his eyes to the inferno.

"No," August said tearfully. "Pleas—"

August stopped as Sakla plunged his hand deep into August's chest. A blood-curdling scream tore from August's throat, echoing through the air. Electric flashes of white light danced across his face and body as if something were violently ripping his very essence away. The sensation was suffocating; a brutal force wrenched the breath from his lungs while every nerve screamed in agony as if flames were consuming him from the inside. Sakla threw his head back and released a guttural, otherworldly wail. Suddenly, a thick, green beam of sparkling light erupted from August's chest and shot straight into Sakla's open mouth.

At that moment, August was overwhelmed by a wave of painful despair; his yelling echoed in the void before it turned into loud, screaming sobs. His body went numb as the sharp pain gave way to an icy grip that enveloped him, while a crushing pressure built in his skull, making him feel as though death was imminent. A burning, relentless tugging sensation surged from his waist to his throat before the green light vanished. Sakla yanked his hand out of August's chest, resulting in August gasping loudly in shock, his eyes wide with terror.

"Mmm, *mmm!* Now that is some *good goddamn loosh energy!*" Sakla said before letting out a loud, disembodied laugh.

A deep frown etched August's face as he weakly dropped his head to the side and closed his eyes. He struggled with each breath; the repeated, gasping, raspy sound coming from him filled the silent room. His vision swirled, a chaotic dance of colors blurred in front of his closed eyes, mimicking the turmoil within. He felt utterly drained and empty of vitality. His limbs were heavy and lifeless.

Gently, Sakla reached out and lifted August's head by the chin. A single tear escaped from August's closed eyes, a silent testament to his despair. At that moment of vulnerability, Sakla transformed, taking the form of a shirtless Herculean figure in a Greek toga, his appearance exuding an ancient strength. His white hair and beard, adorned with golden rings, contrasted starkly against his scale covered skin, which glimmered in the light.

Intricately etched, Sumerian symbol gold cuffs encircled his arms, adding to his majestic presence. Yet, despite the grandeur, a palpable sadness hung in the air, deepened by the stark reminder of August's frailty in the face of such power.

"I am Ea, I am Nissiku, I am Enki! I am Cronos! I am Moloch! I am Baal! I am the *father*! I am your *owner*! You *belong* to me! You are my *property* because I am *God*!" Sakla's voice echoed through the shadows, each word dripping with a hostility that chilled the air. "I am the *spark* of your existence, and soon, I shall be the *darkness* that *consumes* you!"

Sakla yanked August forward and then threw him through the wall, sending him crashing onto the cold floor in his own bedroom. A violent coughing fit overtook him as he landed on his stomach, forcing him to clutch his throat, where a painful scratchiness and burning sensation flared. Once the coughing subsided, he gasped for air, each breath hanging in the air like a haunting echo before gradually returning to a more regular rhythm.

A thick, red bruise encircled his neck, a harsh reminder of the encounter. He slid back towards the wall behind him, stopping halfway. A faint moan escaped from him as a deep frown etched his face. Every part of his body throbbed with relentless pain. As he continued back towards the wall, his movements were slow. Settling close to the wall, he closed his eyes and began to slowly rock gently, feeling vulnerable like a frightened child emerging from a nightmare.

Sakla's chilling words about Samantha echoed in his mind:

reincarnated, reincarnated, reincarnated. The weight of that realization crashed down on him—Samantha was truly gone, lost to him *forever*. The sting of that knowledge was even sharper, knowing it came from someone he believed to be Lucifer himself. The other names Sakla shouted felt like shadows, unfamiliar, and distant.

Tears filled August's eyes as he opened them, looked down, and bit his lower lip softly. A frown deepened as he grappled with the violation of being attacked by Lucifer, leaving him feeling small, weak, and fragile. As he shut his eyes again, vivid memories of Samantha flooded his mind—her large, luminous brown eyes that sparkled with warmth, her soft, shoulder-length brown hair that framed her face perfectly, and her radiant, light yellow-brown skin that seemed to glow in the sunlight. Her smile, a beacon of love, had the power to melt away his worries and fill his heart with joy.

He could almost sense the lingering fragrance of her favorite perfume, a delicate blend of rose, sandalwood, and jasmine that always enveloped her. But in an instant, those cherished thoughts were overshadowed by the haunting recollection of his encounter with Lucifer, the piercing pain of the attack that felt like a dagger not just to his body but to his very soul. Tears streamed as he opened his eyes. As far as August knew, this was his first confrontation with Lucifer, a nightmarish experience that left him scarred; it was an experience that he feared would linger in the shadows of his mind for an eternity.

CHAPTER THREE

Nine Months Later

At three-ten in the morning, in the shadowy confines of his Richmond, Virginia abode; forty-one-year-old Noah Hunter stirred restlessly beside his slumbering wife, Leah. Just as he teetered on the brink of a deep, dreamless sleep, an unsettling sound pierced the stillness—a sinister creaking emanating from above. With one eye reluctantly pried open, Noah heard the chilling sound of creaks turn into frantic scurrying across the ceiling. Heart racing, he bolted upright, his gaze fixated on the ominous expanse above.

In a surge of adrenaline, Noah leaped from the bed, fumbled through his nightstand drawer, grabbed his flashlight, and plunged into the darkness beyond the bedroom. As he raced down the stairs, the thunderous stomping reverberated through the house, echoing like a ghostly parade marching across the roof. It was a sound that defied reason, because Noah and Leah had no attic to harbor such noise. The relentless thuds quickened, drawing nearer to the rear of the house, and with a surge of determination, Noah flicked on his flashlight, sprinting towards the back door that led to their deck. He fumbled with the lock, flinging the door open.

The chill of the night air struck him like a slap, heightening his senses and sending a shiver coursing down his spine. The air was thick with an unsettling roar, which seemed to echo from the depths of a creature not of this world. Noah, with his heart pounding, turned abruptly, his flashlight slicing through the darkness to illuminate the ceiling of their home. What he saw sent a chill racing down his spine, a

colossal snake shimmering in hues of golden brown, its size dwarfing even the most fearsome South American green anaconda he had studied in his youth.

But it was not merely the snake's size that seized Noah's breath; No, it was the grotesque visage that adorned its serpentine body. The creature bore the twisted, nightmarish face of a lion, its glowing yellow eyes pierced through the shadows, and its gaping maw revealed a set of long, sharp fangs stained with the remnants of its last meal. The golden mane that crowned its head and slithered down its back stood on end like a forest of thorns, a sinister warning of the terror that lurked above him.

"Holy," Noah said in a low voice while backing away from the deck sliding door and the house itself.

In an instant, the serpent pivoted its head towards Noah; its eyes expanded and glowed with an unnatural intensity as it gaped its maw wide, releasing a chilling, echoing growl that seemed to resonate from the depths of the earth. A surge of terror coursed through Noah; his heart pounded violently against his ribcage, while a sickening twist gripped his stomach, causing the fine hairs on his arms and neck to stand on end. The icy tendrils of fear snaked through his veins as the creature unleashed a haunting wail that pierced the stillness of the night.

"Oh my *god!*" Noah said as he ran back into the house and slammed the back deck door closed.

"Honey—" Leah said, startling Noah, who jumped and spun around.

"Oh! Leah, you scared me!" Noah said while clutching his chest and trying to maintain his heavy breathing.

"Noah, what are you doing up?" Leah asked. "It's three-fifteen in the morning."

Noah shot a glare over at the clock display on their microwave.

She was right. It *was* three-fifteen. Noah always hated that time because his father and other Christian church members always said that three-fifteen specifically, and even the entire hour of three o'clock in the morning, was a time of evilness. The Christians that Noah knew had termed it as *the devil's hour*.

"Noah?" Leah called out. "You want to tell me why you're up this early in the morning?"

"I saw something," Noah said in a low voice, with a brow raised.

"What?" Leah asked. "Noah—"

"Come on," Noah cut in, grabbing her hand and leading her to the door that led to the back deck. "I'll show you."

Leah sighed as she walked out onto the deck with Noah. As Noah shined his flashlight up towards the roof, his eyes widened. The snake was gone, nowhere in sight.

"No," Noah said in a low whisper while shaking his head. "It was there, I know it was. I *saw* it!"

"Honey, you saw what?" Leah asked with a raised brow.

"Leah, I promise I'm not lying! I saw this enormous snake—only the snake had—the face of a lion but *really* disfigured—"

"Uh huh," Leah said with a tilt of her head and a smile. "Look, let's go back to bed."

"What?" Noah said as Leah led him back into the house. "Leah, I'm telling you, I'm *not* lying."

"No, of course not. You're too God fearing to lie, but what I think is that you're suffering the effects of a bad nightmare or something—"

"No, I'm *not*," Noah responded as he walked with her back upstairs towards their bedroom.

"Uh, sure. Come on, let's go back to sleep; you and I both have to be up for work in just a few hours."

As Noah got back in bed next to his wife, he lay on his side, staring at the big, double bay windows that illuminated their bedroom

with the bright light of the outside moon. Closing his eyes, Noah tried to fall asleep but couldn't. The image of that creature on their roof remained permanent in his mind. *I couldn't have just imagined what I saw. There was no way I did! It was right there! I saw it! It was there!*



At eight years old, Noah sat in a front pew at True Gospel Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., as a man softly played Reverend James Cleveland's "Peace Be Still" on an organ. Looking to his right, Noah stared up at his father, who stood beside him.

"I'd like to give all honor and glory to God this Sunday morning," Jack said with a smile and a nod, "and I just want to say how grateful I am to God for letting me see another day. God didn't have to wake me up this morning, but I'm so thankful he did!"

As the other church members, including the pastors, cheered and clapped at Jack's statement, Noah looked around in all directions, studying the faces of those around him.

"My testimony this morning," Jack continued, "is of my joy over the fact that God has given me a spirit of courage and bravery. Despite having stage four cancer, I know for a fact that I'm going to beat this illness. I know that God will completely heal me because in Matthew 17:20, he said that if I have faith as small as a grain of mustard seed, I'll be able to tell the mountain to move, and it will move because nothing will be impossible, and nothing is impossible for Christ Jesus. Amen?"

As the other members of the church, including the pastors, cheered and clapped again, Jack joined in. Meanwhile, Noah gazed up at the enormous, golden crucifix statue above the pulpit, depicting a bloodied and bruised Jesus nailed to it. His gaze was intense, as if he were trying to convey a message to the figure on the cross through his eyes—a message of prayer, pleading, and begging for Jesus to heal his

father. Suddenly, a massive ball of white light erupted in the middle of the crucifix.

As Noah shut his eyes, the light exploded in his face. In an instant, Noah found himself floating above a bright, yellowish, circular mass of gases, surrounded by numerous huge, bright stars in a black sky. The atmosphere was parched, yet an icy chill coursed through Noah's veins, causing his teeth to clatter like brittle bones. A deafening, mechanical whirring erupted from the darkness, a relentless, pulsing drone that clawed into his mind, vibrating through every fiber of his being, shaking the air itself into trembling echoes of dread. It was an unearthly, inescapable sound—a monstrous symphony of grinding gears, screeching metal, and unnatural hums that clawed at his sanity, twisting reality into a nightmare he couldn't escape.

Noah spun his head wildly—left, right, behind him, then downward—desperately searching for the source. But it revealed itself in a vision so horrifying; it blotted out reason. An infernal maelstrom of fiery orange rings, crackling with molten red electricity, spun ceaselessly around a grotesque mass of gases that writhed and pulsed like a living hell. Within these blazing loops, screams erupted—raw, guttural, unearthly cries of agony. They echoed with a despair so profound, it clawed at his soul, ripping apart the fragile veneer of sanity.

As Noah stared deeper into those infernal rings, horror engulfed him like a suffocating shadow. Countless souls were trapped within the hellish vortex, consumed by flames that roared and consumed their flesh, transforming them into writhing, broken husks. Their bodies jerked and spasmed in an endless, torturous dance, convulsing beneath relentless, merciless electric currents that tore into them with savage brutality. The air reeked of ash, sulfur, and the stench of despair—a putrid, suffocating miasma of suffering so intense it clawed at his lungs, threatening to drown him in its black abyss.

The anguished wails of the damned intensified, transforming

into a deafening, relentless chorus of torment that drowned out all reason. They echoed through the void like the screams of a thousand dying worlds, searing into his mind. Then, outside the swirling chaos, seven colossal serpents appeared—hulking, nightmarish titans floating ominously; their forms shrouded in malevolent shadow. Their shimmering scales, a sickly golden-brown, glistened with the sheen of rot and decay, reflecting the hellfire around them. Their long, shaggy hair flickered like burning embers, twisted into thorny, jagged shapes that crackled with corrupt electric energy.

Each serpent bore a fierce, lion-like face, crowned with jagged horns that pierced the darkness like the jagged edges of broken nightmares. Their eyes glowed with a sinister yellow, burning with a malevolence so deep it seemed to devour the darkness itself, piercing into the very depths of his soul. Their mouths gaped wide, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth that glistened with the blood of the damned, dripping with malice. Their long, forked tongues flicked hungrily in the stale, corrupted air, tasting the scent of mortal terror that clung to him like a shroud.

Suddenly, they unleashed a chorus of bone-chilling wails—groans so monstrous, so filled with pure hatred and despair, they seemed to shatter the very fabric of reality. Their bodies vibrated with a corrupt, malevolent energy, radiating an aura of pure evil that seeped into the shadows, corrupting everything around them. The serpents hovered in the darkness, their glowing eyes scanning, waiting, hungry for the next soul to drag into their eternal nightmare. And he knew—there was no escape from this nightmare.

The abyss had opened its maw, and it was ravenous. As Noah stood frozen, his heart pounded in terror, unable to look away from the horror unfolding before him. The serpents ensnared Noah's gaze as they lunged towards him, their grotesque mouths stretching into monstrous grins, accompanied by a growl that reverberated like a death knell. A

chill gripped Noah's heart; each beat faltering as bile clawed its way up his throat, scorching him from within. He swallowed hard, but the acrid taste lingered, a bitter reminder of the terror that enveloped him. With their sinister agility, the snakes flickered through the rings, closing in on him with a speed that sent beads of sweat cascading down Noah's brow. The icy grip of fear melted away and was replaced by a suffocating heat that made him feel like he was being cooked alive. Desperation clawed at his mind as he willed his limbs to move, but they betrayed him, leaving him paralyzed in a nightmare.

A scream tore from his throat as the serpents loomed inches away from him, their foul breath reeking of sulfur and decay, invading his senses with a nauseating intensity. A serpent's cold, unyielding grip clamped around the nape of Noah's neck, eliciting a primal yell that echoed in the void. Noah thrashed against the creature's hold, but it was futile; he was trapped, a puppet in a macabre play. With a bone-chilling growl, the snake forced his head downward. At that moment, horror washed over Noah as he saw his father trapped within the rings. Electricity jolted throughout Jack's body repeatedly, and Jack's cries pierced the air like a haunting melody of despair.

"Help me!" Jack cried out. "Help me get out of here, Noah!"

Tears streamed from Noah's eyes and—



Suddenly, Noah shot up in bed in his bedroom with a loud gasp and tearful eyes. He could still hear the faint screams, cries, and yells in his ears. Closing his eyes as tears streamed, he could still see his father's face and tearful blue eyes.

"Help me!" Noah could still hear Jack crying, "Help me get out of here, Noah!"

Noah shot open his eyes, his brows clenched, and his face

formed a frown. *Help him get out of where?* Was his father in hell? Was that what his dream was referencing? As Noah took in several deep inhales and slow exhales, he heard the cries of his father fade away. Feeling a slight pain shoot through his forehead, Noah lay back down and stared up at the ceiling, squinted his eyes, and frowned while biting down on his lower lip, trying to decipher as best as he could the meaning of his dream before he heard—

“Dad, I can’t find my red shoes!” Hazel, Noah, and Leah’s eight-year-old yelled from the hallway.

Sighing, Noah closed his eyes and frowned. His day was just beginning, and if he were being honest with himself, with how tired he still was and after the dream he just had, he wasn’t in any way ready for it.

Later, Noah sat at his kitchen table, shuffling through the bills he and Leah had—the gas bill, the electric bill, the water bill, the car insurance bill, and, of course, the rent. They were up to their elbows in bills, and Noah had no idea how he and Leah would be able to tackle it all. Noah and Leah had jobs, but they weren’t enough, especially when Leah’s job had cut her hours, and Noah was only making ten dollars an hour on his. Sighing, Noah dropped his head in his hands, closed his eyes, and did the only thing he knew of to do—*pray*.

“God, bow down thine ear,” Noah whispered, “Lord, hear me, for I am poor and in need. Preserve my soul, for I am holy. My God—”

Noah stopped as he felt a breeze brush past his face. Lifting his head and opening his eyes, he looked around the kitchen but saw no one else in the room except himself. With a slight shake of his head and briefly raised brows, Noah again lowered his head and closed his eyes.

“Save thy servant that trusteth in thee,” Noah continued, “be merciful unto me, oh Lord, for I cry unto thee daily—”

Noah stopped as he heard chirping within the room. Shooting open his eyes and lifting his head, he looked all around the kitchen again but saw no one else in there with him. The chirping grew louder.

“Leah?” Noah called out while getting up from his seat and walking to the kitchen entrance. “Hazel—”

Noah stopped as he bumped into Leah in a red business skirt suit with black hair flowing on her shoulders. Wrapping her arms around him, she kissed him before he pushed her away.

“Honey, come on,” Noah said, “What was with the chirping noises? I was in the middle of prayer.”

Leah stared at him with a brow raised and a slow head tilt.

“Chirping noises? What are you talking about?”

“The chirping noises you were just making. Leah, I don’t like to be disturbed when I’m in prayer, you know that.”

“Noah, I wasn’t making any chirping noises—”

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” Noah interjected before turning and walking away.

Leah gaped at him with a stunned glare before shaking her head and walking towards the fridge.

“Good morning to you, too.”

Noah deeply sighed; his face was shadowed by guilt as he approached her, wrapped his arms around her from behind, and placed a soft kiss on her neck.

“I’m sorry, good morning, sweetheart,” he whispered.

Leah turned to him, embracing him while examining his features closely.

“What’s troubling you, Noah?” she asked, picking up on his discomfort.

He briefly closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“It’s just these bills—they’re really stacking up on us. Thank God Lilith told me to come in at nine-thirty, which gives me a little time to

think of some solutions, but honestly, I'm worried about how we're going to handle all of this."

"I know it's worrying me too, which is why I was thinking about getting a second job—"

"No," he interjected, "did you ask God if that's what he wants you to do?"

Leah shot him a disapproving frown.

"No, and I don't plan to," she replied, letting go of him and stepping back, leaving Noah staring at her with widened eyes.

"What do you mean you don't plan to?" he pressed.

"Exactly what I said, Noah. I don't intend to—"

"Why not? Leah—"

"Noah, listen, I've come across a lot of new things about God and Christianity recently, and honestly, it's shaken me to my core."

Noah raised an eyebrow, intrigued.

"Really? What did you discover?"

"You really want to know?" Leah challenged.

"Absolutely, enlighten me."

"God is not who we think he is. He's actually one and the same with Lucifer—"

"Oh, please, you've got to be kidding!" Noah exclaimed, bursting into laughter.

"Noah, I'm *serious*. The Bible talks about heaven and hell, but heaven and hell *don't* even exist. The white light after death that people see—"

"Mom! I can't find my Jonah and the Whale backpack. Have you seen it?" Hazel shouted from her bedroom.

Leah sighed with a roll of her eyes.

"Look, we'll talk about this later," Leah said before turning and walking out.

Noah sat at the table with a frown and a shake of his head. He

was alarmed by what his wife had just said. How could she *not* believe in heaven and hell? How could she even *dare* believe that God and Lucifer were one and the same? In his mind, that was outright blasphemy. He made a mental note to discuss her ridiculous claims later.

Later that morning, as Noah walked to the front door where Leah and Hazel were putting on their jackets, he took hold of their hands.

“Hey, wait, we have to have morning prayer,” Noah said.

Leah looked at him with a frown and a raise of her brow.

“Noah, no, I—I don’t *want* to,” Leah replied.

Noah stared at Leah with squinted eyes and a shake of his head.

“What?” Noah asked. “What do you mean you don’t want to? We always have prayer before leaving the house.”

“Yeah, and that has been something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about,” Leah said.

“What exactly is there to talk to me about? Leah, good God, what has gotten *into* you this morning? You know very well that prayer is essential—”

“Noah, *please!* I have valid reasons why I don’t want us to get locked into the mental construct of Christianity anymore, okay? Look, we’ll talk about it later tonight, all right?”

Noah sighed with a roll of his eyes. He couldn’t understand for the life of him why she was acting like this. However, he didn’t want to argue with her over the matter in front of Hazel. With a shake of his head, he let out another sigh.

“All right, fine, well, you two better go, or you’ll be late. Go on.”

“Honey, you aren’t mad at me, are you?” Leah asked.

Noah contrived a smile while caressing her face and shaking his head.

“No, of course not. I love you.”

Noah pulled Leah into his arms and kissed and hugged her. Smiling, she hugged him back. Stooping down to Hazel's level, he also embraced and kissed her.

“I love you and Hazel both.”

“We love you too, Daddy.”

Noah waved goodbye as Leah drove away before he turned to go back inside. Walking into the kitchen, Noah yanked a chair away from the table and dropped down in it. In the kitchen, a portable television perched on top of the refrigerator hummed softly; the low drone of news filling the cramped space. Noah reached for the remote, intending to mute the chatter, but the anchor's steady voice caught his ear.

“...and the current government shutdown in the United States has escalated with the immediate suspension of SNAP food stamps nationwide,” she announced, every syllable crisp, deliberate. “The President remains firm in his stance, suggesting the shutdown—if it continues—will soon touch every aspect of American life, even the bedrock programs.”

Noah set the remote down, unease prickling beneath his skin. He was no stranger to hard times—he'd survived more than a few on faith alone—but hearing that millions could lose the very basics of survival stirred a low, coiling worry in his gut. A graphic flashed on the television screen: LIVE FROM THE OVAL OFFICE. The screen cut to the President sitting behind the Resolute Desk with his eyes narrowed.

“Let me tell you something, the Democrats—the *Radical* Left—they don't want to make a deal. It's a disgrace, what they're doing to this country,” the President said, his voice slick with indignation.

The President leaned closer to the microphone.

“But I have the power—the absolute *power*—and if they keep this up, I will do what needs to be *done*. We're talking Medicare, we're talking Medicaid, Social Security. It's all on the table. I can make things *very* bad

for the American people, believe me, if I don't get what I want. They will regret this. They will regret it *bigly*."

The words rolled out like distant thunder, leaving a faint, electric silence in their wake. Noah felt no sudden panic—life had taught him to expect storms—but a chill worked its way through him all the same, as though someone had opened a door to a dark and unfamiliar room. The notion that a single man could threaten so many lives bruised his heart; it felt like standing at the edge of a cliff and watching the ground crumble, pebble by pebble. Noah exhaled slowly.

The dread lingered at the edges—thin, persistent—but it didn't drown him. He reminded himself, as he always did, that God remained sovereign even over men who flaunted earthly power. Still, an unsettling weight pressed on his chest, a subtle warning that storms could arrive quicker than clouds could gather. Noah picked up the remote and clicked the television off. In the sudden hush, the tiny kitchen felt cavernous. For a few heartbeats he heard nothing but the thrum of the refrigerator. Then the wall-mounted phone rang—one loud ring after another. At once, a name surfaced in his mind: *Christopher*.

The knowing was neither a guess nor a hunch; it arrived whole, like a word spoken directly into his chest. Since childhood, this quiet certainty had followed Noah, as dependable as sunrise. He had tested it—had counted seventy-nine correct "predictions" in a single summer; a streak statistics alone couldn't explain. Noah had no caller-ID, no special pattern of ring tones, no logical cue. Yet time after time, he recognized the caller before lifting the receiver. Was it a gift of the spirit? A shard of the miraculous slipped into an otherwise ordinary life? He didn't know. He only sensed that the knowledge came from somewhere outside the usual workings of nerves and memory, delivered by hands he couldn't see.

Whether angelic whisper, divine nudge, or something stranger still, it was beyond coincidence—an ability that could belong only to the

realm of the supernatural, even if Noah himself had not yet dared to name it so. The thought that Christopher was on the other end steadied Noah, sweeping away the gloom left by the President's threats. The coil of worry inside him eased; a lift of warmth settled over his shoulders. On the fourth ring Noah lifted the handset from its cradle, a smile already forming.

"Morning, Chris."

A burst of laughter crackled through Noah's receiver.

"Bruh, you *gotta* quit runnin' that spiritual caller ID, man. I ain't even let it ring ten times yet, and you already knew it was me. How you even *do* that? No—wait, never mind, I forgot I already *do* know but you wouldn't want to *hear how* I know so—"

Noah laughed and shook his head.

"You're right," Noah cut in, "I wouldn't, because I heard it from you before, something about me having—third eye abilities or whatever—*anyway*, what's going on with you today?"

"Nothing much. I'm just on my way to work. Did you get a response back regarding your submission to the Hanz Literary Agency?"

Noah sighed with a brief close of his eyes and a shake of his head.

"Yeah, they rejected my story. They said it just wasn't in their wheelhouse."

"See, I told you, Noah. No one wants to read the stuff you write about because almost everyone knows it's based on bullshit, bruh."

"It's not based on bull—crap, Chris," Noah replied, "it's the truth, but of course, people don't *want* the truth when it's about God. Anyway, I'm not worried because I just know that God will—"

"Oh no, hold it, hold it, hold it," Christopher interrupted, "please don't go into that God-belief shit again."

"It's not God belief—crap, Chris. You're the atheist, not me."

"Noah, you keep saying that, and I *keep* telling you I'm not an

atheist. I'm a spiritualist, anyway. Look, all I'm saying is what I keep telling you—"

"Yeah, yeah, that God isn't a god of love, he's really some kind of evil—*demiurge*—"

"First of all, it's *demiurge*," Christopher corrected after laughing, "and he isn't a god of love. God is—"

"Chris, stop, now look, what God is, is very important in my life, and you know that because we've talked about this before, haven't we?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Good, and so you know what's coming up next then."

"Noah—"

"Bye, Chris, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Ending the call, Noah snickered and shook his head.

Christopher's persistence in trying to convert him away from Christianity always amused Noah because no matter how much Noah resisted, Christopher just kept on trying.

As August turned down North Twentieth Street in Richmond, Virginia, he glanced at his watch. It was five minutes to nine. It was still early enough for him to get home, do some tasks around the house, and have a cup of coffee before going back out again to carry out his professional duties of the day. Just when he reached the middle of the residential block, his car shut off. He frowned at his steering wheel before putting his car in park and pressing the engine start/stop button to turn the car off and then pressing the engine start/stop button to turn the car on again, but it wouldn't start.

"Oh, come on," he said in a low voice before pressing the engine start/stop button again to no avail.

He tried again, and again, and again, and again, and again to start

the car, and each time, the car would make a sputtering sound but refused to start. He knew it couldn't have been that his car was out of gas because his tank was full when he left the house that morning. Furthermore, he also knew it couldn't have been car trouble because his car was brand new. In fact, he had just bought it three months prior. Trying once more, August pressed the start/stop button to no avail.

"Shit," he said before sighing with a shake of his head.

Grabbing his cell phone from his duffel bag on the front passenger seat, he clicked the screen on and dialed. However, the words "no signal" flashed across the screen three times. August's eyes widened with a rough, short exhale.

"Oh, you've gotta be fucking kidding me," he said in a low voice before laughing, sitting back and stomping his foot down on the floor of the car.

Tossing his phone across the front passenger seat, he leaned forward and squinted with a brow raised while looking through his front windshield at the houses on both sides of the streets. His eyes focused on a modest, single-story ranch with gray siding that had begun to fade under the relentless sun and a roofline that looked just a little tired. There was a "God bless this home" sign in the front yard. He sighed with another raise of his brow.

Despite the ridiculousness of the sign, he knew that if anyone in that neighborhood would be hospitable to him, it would be whoever lived in the house with the God sign in the yard. After turning on his hazard lights, August opened his door. He was about to get out when he stopped and raised his brow for a few seconds. Leaning back into his car, he reached into his duffel bag and pulled out a white flyer before getting out and walking up to the house.

Noah was drinking coffee in his kitchen when he heard the doorbell ring. He sighed and rolled his eyes before getting up and walking to the front door. Upon opening it, he saw a six-foot-two, athletically built man with dark brown hair and bright, ocean blue eyes, whom he didn't recognize.

"Hi?" Noah said with an eyebrow raised and a confused frown.

The man's smile was easy and genuine.

"Grand rising," the man greeted back with a slight nod and a smile as he handed Noah a flyer. "I—"

August stopped as Noah frowned with a slight shake of his head.

"Grand what? Grand—rising—what does that mean?"

August let out a breathed laugh.

"Uh, it's just a much better alternative to saying good morning," August replied, "Um, anyway, I'm—"

"August Cameron, I know."

Noah froze, the words already out of his mouth. *August Cameron.* The name had just *appeared* in his mind, fully formed and certain, the instant the man had opened his mouth. August's charismatic smile faded into a look of genuine astonishment. He stared at Noah, his bright blue eyes slightly wide.

"Wait. You do? Have you heard of me or read my books?"

Still stunned, Noah shook his head.

"I...I don't—no; I've never heard of you or your—books before. Your name just...popped into my head."

Noah frowned, the sudden, unexplained knowledge unsettling him deeply. It felt completely illogical, un-Christian, and frankly, weird. A slow, knowing smile returned to August's face; a look of profound understanding replacing the surprise. He laughed softly, a low, charismatic sound.

"Wow, a Christian with Telepathic ESP. That's a surprise, even for me," August said in a low voice with a smile and a slight shake of his head.

Noah's frown deepened. He raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"What?"

August shook his head, before briefly closing his eyes, dismissing the moment.

"Never mind." August paused, his composure instantly restored; the cool charisma was now layered with an intriguing mystery.

"Um, anyway," August continued, gesturing to the flyer he was holding. "I just opened a rehab and shelter about—twenty-five minutes from here, and I thought I'd give this to you in case, you know—you might know someone who might need the rehab or shelter's services."

Taking the flyer from August, Noah read through the words on the flyer and nodded.

"Is this a Christian shelter? I ask because I know there was talk of one opening—"

"Oh no, this is nothing like that," August cut in gently, radiating calm certainty. "I'm not a Christian. I'm a Maltheist, but that's not important anyway because you don't have to be—"

"A Maltheist?" Noah interrupted. "So that means you—*don't* believe God exists?"

"Well, no, I believe he exists. I just also believe that he's evil and doesn't deserve to be worshiped, but never mind that—"

August stopped as Noah rolled his eyes at him with a frown before crumpling up the flyer in his hand.

"Yeah, stop talking, you've just lost points with me by saying that. God doesn't deserve to be worshiped. How *dare* you? Get off my doorstep with that garbage."

Before August could speak again, Noah hurled the crumpled flyer at his face and then slammed the door shut. August briefly pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek, smiled, looked down and away, shook his head, and laughed heartily, unsurprised by Noah's behavior.

Walking back towards the kitchen, Noah laughed while shaking his head. He couldn't imagine someone saying such ridiculousness. In Noah's mind, God not only deserved to be worshiped, he was *worthy* to be worshiped. Noah was about to sit at the table when he stopped at the sound of his doorbell ringing again. Sighing with annoyance, he turned, marched back to the door, and swung it open, staring at August with nostrils flared and brows raised.

"Look," August said with a faint smile, "fine, you don't want the flyer—"

"You're right, I *don't*," Noah interrupted sharply, "so why are you still on my doorstep?"

"My car broke down," August replied with a frown, "I tried several times to get it started, but it won't turn on, so—can I use your phone to call AAA?"

"No, use your cell phone, you Jesus hater," Noah snapped.

Noah attempted to close the door on August, but August pushed the door open with his hand.

"Well, wait a second, I tried to, but for some reason, I can't get a signal—"

"And how is that *my* problem?" Noah replied with a roll of his eyes.

August stared at Noah for a few seconds with a shake of his head before looking away from him with a smile.

"Wow, you're hilarious," August replied before laughing.

"Go away," Noah said in an icy tone before attempting to close the door again.

"Oh, come on now," August said with a faint smile while pushing the door open again. "You're a Christian; you Christians are supposed to be *nice*, friendly, and helpful. Isn't that what you all claim your God teaches?"

"Yeah, nice, friendly, and helpful, except to people like you who

hate my Jesus and his father.”

As August’s smile faded, he sighed with a roll of his eyes. This man was starting to get on his nerves.

“Look, I—*apologize* for talking about—your *lord* and *savior*—”

“See? Now, I don’t think you even *meant* that *seriously*,” Noah said with an amused smirk.

August sighed loudly and sucked his teeth with a deep frown. His face turning red and the palms of his hands becoming hot were signals that he was starting to get angry.

“Look damn—”

As Noah widened his eyes at what August was about to say, August stopped, looked down, and bit down on his lower lip while briefly closing his eyes. He wasn’t going to let this guy get him into a state of anger.

“Look, can I *please* use your phone? I have somewhere important to be at one, so I have to get this car picked up and towed away quickly and then get an Uber to get to where I need to go.”

Noah sighed with a shake of his head.

“You don’t have gas in the car, or is your car a lemon or something?” Noah asked.

“No, I had a full tank when I left the house, and the tank is *still* full, and the car is brand new, so—I don’t know what the problem is.”

Noah looked over August’s shoulder at August’s car before rolling his eyes at August and shaking his head again.

“Come on, I know a thing or two about cars, so let’s look under the hood before you call AAA.”

August sighed with a brief close of his eyes as Noah closed the door to his house and walked past him towards his car.

“Great, thank you,” August replied as he followed Noah.

“Don’t thank me, thank the God you hate,” Noah replied, “though, I’m sure he’d appreciate an immediate, loud, and public retraction more

than your cheap gratitude right now."

August stopped in his tracks and sighed again with a roll of his eyes. That moment right there reminded August why he left Christianity.

"Oh Jesus Christ," August said before sighing.

Noah stopped and looked at him with a deep frown.

"You just used the lord's name in *vain*?" Noah asked.

August raised a brow and frowned at him.

"What? I—"

"Forget it," Noah said sharply. "Find someone else to help you."

August laughed but it wasn't a joyful one; it was the sharp, airy laugh of a man who felt like he'd just stepped into a time machine or a very poorly written sitcom. He looked at Noah, waiting for the punchline, but Noah's face remained a mask of stony, righteous indignation.

"You're—you're *serious*?" August asked, his voice climbing an octave in pure incredulity. "We're *really* doing the 'blasphemy' thing? *Right now*? In the middle of a literal car crisis?"

"Hey, it's never the wrong time to stand up for the King of Kings," Noah snapped, crossing his arms and beginning to turn back toward his front porch.

August stood frozen for a second, watching Noah retreat. The sheer absurdity of the situation made him want to scream, but the thought of being stuck there was worse than the thought of playing along with that guy's melodrama.

"Okay, okay, okay—hold on a second," August said, catching up to Noah in three long strides.

August didn't beg, but he did hold up his hands in a gesture of mock-surrender. August forced his face into an expression of exaggerated, wide-eyed solemnity.

"Look," August said, "I am just—deeply, deeply sorry. Truly. I didn't realize that my—how should I put this?—*passionate* choice of

words would be such a profound burden on your spirit.”

Noah stopped and looked at him, squinting suspiciously. August didn’t miss a beat, pressing a hand to his chest and speaking with a sweetness that was just a hair too sugary to be sincere.

“I was clearly just—*overcome* by the moment. My vocabulary was simply—*unrefined*. I would be *ever* so grateful if you could find it in your heart to forgive my—*wayward* tongue, just this once, so that we might focus on the more temporal matter of my car.”

August gave a small, repentant-looking nod, his eyes sparkling with a private, condescending amusement that he was sure was invisible to someone as blinded by piety as the man. Noah’s expression softened and he let out a long, theatrical sigh and uncrossed his arms.

“Well...the Bible does say to forgive seventy times seven. I suppose I can’t turn my back on someone in need, even one who struggles so much with his—*internal darkness*.”

August immediately looked away, pressing his tongue firmly into the inside of his cheek to keep from bursting out in a fit of hysterical laughter. A slow, pained smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he stared at a random patch of dry grass. He was fighting every instinct he possessed to stay silent. He desperately wanted to ask if the “internal darkness” was located near his gallbladder or if it was more of a general vibe, but he knew that would result in him walking ten blocks to the nearest gas station.

It was the ultimate irony: this man was trying so hard to be a “Jesus figure,” yet he was acting like a self-appointed hall monitor for the Pearly Gates. August took a deep, steadying breath, swallowed the biting retort sitting on the tip of his tongue, and turned back with that same mask of forced, sugary politeness.

“I appreciate your—*immense grace*,” August replied, his voice flat but just polite enough to pass. “It’s truly—a *testament* to your *character*.”

Noah nodded, looking satisfied and perhaps a little smug, and

began walking back toward the car with a renewed sense of purpose. August followed a few steps behind, rolling his eyes so hard it actually hurt. Approaching his car, August ducked his head inside on the driver's side and pulled the hood release latch.

"Well, first," Noah said, "what kind of sound does it make when you try to turn the car on?"

August frowned and raised a brow at him.

"Uh, you know, just the regular—car won't turn on sound, I guess."

"Try to start it up so I can hear because the sound will determine what's wrong with your car."

August nodded, settled into the driver's seat, put his foot on the brake, and pressed the engine start/stop button. Miraculously, the car roared to life immediately, leaving August with his widened eyes and his mouth agape in astonishment.

"What the *hell*?" August exclaimed, a grin spreading across his face.

Noah stared at August with a skeptical gaze and a shake of his head.

"You know, Jesus *despises* liars," Noah remarked, his tone icy.

"What?" August retorted before laughing and stepping out of the car. "Oh no, no, this car would *not* start a few minutes ago, I swear! It refused to start no matter how many times I tried. I don't know what happened."

"Uh, yeah, well, take care, *Augusto*," Noah replied, rolling his eyes dismissively before walking away.

August watched him leave with an annoyed frown.

"It's Aug—oh, whatever, Jesus freak," he said, dismissing Noah with a wave of his hand and a shake of his head before getting back into the car.

Upon walking back inside his house, Noah was on his way to his kitchen when the loud sound of his stereo from the living room halted him immediately. The song that filled the air was “Landslide” by The Dixie Chicks, a version of Noah’s all-time favorite song and also his father’s. Noah hadn’t allowed himself to listen to “Landslide” for decades, as the emotional weight was too much to bear. The song brought back vivid memories of his father, transporting Noah back to his childhood. The scent of his father’s Stetson cologne filled the air—sage, citrus, vetiver, cedar, patchouli, musk, honey, amber, vanilla, and tonka bean mingling together.

As the song reached its main chorus, Noah was enveloped in a deep, emotional warmth, a poignant reminder of his father’s presence. He felt his father’s presence enveloping the room, a comforting yet heart-wrenching sensation that brought him to sobs. As Noah collapsed onto the arm of the sofa, his tears flowed as intensely as they had on the day his father passed away. Without understanding how or why, he was certain his father was reaching out from beyond, trying to communicate something profound.

“I miss you, Dad,” Noah managed to say between sobs, the weight of his longing heavy in his voice, “I miss you so much.”

But as quickly as it had come, the familiar scent of his father’s cologne and the comforting warmth that had surrounded Noah vanished into thin air. Noah sprang up, scanning the room through tearful, wide eyes, his heart sinking.

“Dad?” he called out, his voice a mix of hope and despair. “Dad, where did you go?”

Noah sat down on the arm of the sofa and sighed in frustration; his shoulders slumped down, and confusion was written across his face. He couldn’t grasp why the presence had disappeared so suddenly. Yet, that brief moment of connection was so precious; it reassured him that he wasn’t alone, that his father’s spirit was still watching over him,

reaching out from the afterlife.

After spending close to an hour in front of his computer, navigating through the mundane yet necessary tasks of paying bills and responding to emails, all while the melody of “Držim Ti Miesto” by Team enveloped the room, August felt the weight of the morning already pressing down on him. Weary, he rubbed his eyes, the world before him melding into a blur of doubles. As August pulled open a desk drawer, his eyes momentarily widened at the sight of a lone piece of white paper resting within. He lifted it and locked his gaze onto the mysterious symbols inscribed upon it:

[illegible]

Those were the identical symbols in his dream; a recurring nightmare rooted in a terrifying childhood event. Each morning that he awakened after having the vivid dream, August found himself compulsively writing the symbols down, line after line, as though he believed that through sheer repetition, their meaning would unveil itself. He was so engrossed in the symbols that he almost didn't notice the sound of his doorbell echoing through the room. He sighed before placing the paper back in his drawer, closing it, and walking out of his office. Upon opening his front door, he was surprised to see his mother, Victoria, standing on his doorstep. Surprise lifted his brows.

“Mom—what are you doing here?” August said in an icy tone.

"I just—I needed to see you," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

A heavy silence settled between them, the weight of her unexpected visit hanging in the air. August's initial frown of coldness

slowly softened.

“Come in,” he said, stepping aside to let her in.

“Thank you,” Victoria responded with a nod before stepping into the interior of his home.

“I was about to make coffee. Would you like a cup?” August offered, leading the way to the kitchen with his mother trailing close behind.

“Yes, please, black—”

“With just two scoops of sugar, no cream,” he finished for her gently, his gaze locked with hers, a soft intensity in his eyes. “I still remember.”

Victoria nodded with a tender smile. As she settled at the kitchen table, the coffee maker began its comforting hum. Her throat cleared as she braced herself to bridge the emotional distance that time and absence had woven between them.

“So, why are you *here*, Mom?” August said, his voice icy.

August’s movements were sharp as he yanked a chair from the table and seated himself with a defiant thud.

“The last glimpse I had of you was a fleeting *thirty* seconds at Samantha’s funeral,” August added.

“I don’t know, August. I thought you’d be happy to see me,” Victoria responded in a soft, almost low tone.

“*Should* I be?” August asked in an unmistakable cold tone with a brow raised.

Victoria’s gaze fell to the table as a shadow of sorrow briefly crossed her features before she exhaled a heavy sigh.

“August,” she began, her quivering voice a fragile thread of hope and regret, “I came here because I’m *tired* of this rift we have over religion. I was at your Aunt Jackie’s house this Sunday, watching her and Tim talk and laugh with each other. And last night, I was haunted by a dream so vivid that—it almost—it almost frightened me to death—I

dreamed that you had *died*. It was—so *bizarre*.”

August frowned with a slight shake of his head.

“Yeah, it *sounds* bizarre because I’m not dying *anytime* soon, so...”

August said with a slight shake of his head.

“Well, it was just what I dreamed,” Victoria said with a frown and a slight shake of her head. “Anyway, in the dream, I felt this—this agony of knowing that the last words I ever spoke to you were steeped in anger.”

Her eyes diverted and closed for several seconds; a struggle evident in her attempt to stave off tears.

“Listen,” Victoria said, her voice cracking with emotion, “our beliefs might differ—I believe in God, and you don’t, and I get it now that we’ll never see eye to eye on that. But I just can’t let that be why we lose more time together. I just can’t let anger shape the last memories we might ever make.”

August stared at her in silence for a few seconds as a storm of emotions brewed behind the frown on his face. His heart wavered between hope and skepticism.

“How can I be sure you won’t cut me out of your life again?” he asked almost in a whisper, his voice slightly cracking with hurt. “I mean because—after Samantha died, I was so deep in grief, and I *needed* you. I needed you so much, but you were *nowhere*. I mean, you really left a void within me for—so *long*, Mom.”

Tears finally broke free as Victoria reached out her trembling hand and held his.

“I know, and I’m so sorry. I should have never treated you the way I did, and for that, August, I’m truly sorry. But I’m here now, and I swear, if you’ll let me, I’ll *never* leave your side again. I don’t want to fight anymore because you’re my son, my baby boy and I—I *love* you, August.”

The dam inside August broke at her words. His emotions overwhelmed him as tears flooded his eyes, and he surged forward and

embraced her tightly.

"I love you too, Mom," he said tearfully.

They parted slightly, and he kissed her cheek, a silent testament to their mended bond.

"Oh, I've *missed* having you around," she whispered tearfully before pulling him back into an embrace.

"I've missed you too," he replied, a small laugh escaping from him, "especially your homemade Dublin coddle—"

"You know, I just made that *yesterday*!" she cut in with a smile.

"Oh, Mom, *please* tell me you brought some over," he said while wiping his tears away.

"I did. It's in the car!" she beamed.

"Yes! Oh, Mom, I'm so glad we're back on good terms again," he exclaimed before they embraced again.

"I know, me too, sweetheart," Victoria said before kissing him on the side of his head. "I love you, honey bunny."

Later that evening, in a classroom inside Takoma Montessori, Noah sat at a table with four toddlers, talking to them as they played with puzzles. Glancing up at the clock, he exhaled with a brief close of his eyes and a faint smile. It was five minutes to six, which meant his job as a teacher was almost done for the day. His eyes glanced over at his classroom door as he saw fellow teacher Rebekah open the door and walk in holding the hand of David, a heavyset, sixty-pound, autistic two-year-old.

"Hey, I'm done for the day," Rebekah said, "but he's the only one left in my class, so Lilith told me to bring him here with you."

Noah forced a smile, but inside, he was furious. His red balled-up fists under the table indicated that. He had heard stories from other teachers about how difficult David was, and now David was his problem

until his father arrived.

“Great, thanks, Rebekah.”

“Sure, his father should be here in minutes, so David needs to be changed quickly, or his father will have a fit,” Rebekah said while dropping David’s coat, scarf, and diaper bag beside Noah’s chair.

“Thanks, Noah. See you on Monday!”

Noah stared as David grabbed several Legos from a box in the center of the table and started connecting them. He hoped David would remain as calm and quiet as he was at that moment. However, that hope vanished within seconds as Noah got up, walked over to David, and held David’s hand.

“David, before you play with Legos, I have to change you, okay?”

“No!” David yelled while yanking his arm away.

“David, don’t you want to be clean and dry before your father comes?”

“No! Go away!” David shouted while pushing Noah away.

Noah rolled his eyes. *Here we go.* Noah realized at that moment that talking to David the way he spoke to the two-year-olds in his class wasn’t going to work because David was autistic. Picking David up in his arms, Noah immediately felt his arms ache. Instantly, David started screaming and fighting to get out of Noah’s arms. As Noah walked with David over to a changing table in the corner and lifted him onto it, David broke into loud sobs while flailing his arms and legs around. After several seconds, David’s loud, hysterical cries became deafening in Noah’s ears and gave Noah a headache.

“No! No! I want Mommy! I want Daddy!” David cried while hitting Noah and kicking his legs at Noah’s arms.

“Shh, shh, it’s going to be okay, David. Calm down, kiddo,” Noah said in his soft, soothing voice.

David took his left foot and kicked Noah in the left eye, resulting in Noah yelling out in pain while holding his left eye. The kick wasn’t

severe enough to permanently damage Noah's eye, but it did make it burn and become red and watery. Sighing, Noah massaged his eye with one hand while gripping the side of the diaper table firmly with the other, trying his best to maintain his calm and composure in dealing with the autistic child in front of him.

Shooting his upper body up off the table, David managed to jump down from the table and run away from Noah. Sucking his teeth, Noah rushed after David and grabbed him. David yelled to the top of his lungs while falling to the floor and struggling to escape Noah's grasp. At that moment, a little girl yelled at the top of her lungs.

"Stop! Give it *back*!" the little girl yelled.

"No! It's mine! I had it first!" a little boy retorted.

"So? Give it *back*!" the little girl hollered back before breaking into loud sobs.

Noah whipped his head behind him and saw the little girl and the little boy beside her hitting each other. Rolling his eyes, Noah sighed with a frown. *Great, this is just what I need right now.* Trying to carry a fighting David back over to the changing table resulted in Noah breaking into a heavy sweat on his forehead. Managing to pick David up in his arms successfully, Noah felt a burning, pulling sensation in his lower back.

His arms ached even more than before. The more David fought to get out of Noah's arms, the more pain Noah's back and arms felt. The little girl behind Noah, who was now sobbing loudly, mixed in with David's sobs, made Noah's headache even worse. He had to deal with the crying little girl before it got the school director's and other teachers' attention outside the classroom.

At the same time, he had to change David before his father arrived in minutes. Intense pressure swirled around inside Noah's head. Rushing back over to the changing table, Noah forced David to sit on the table, which only made David sob louder. Noah clutched his chest,

feeling it beat fast and hard. As a severe pain shot through his forehead, Noah grabbed his forehead, closed his eyes, and groaned. The crying from David and the little girl behind him made it very hard for Noah to think about how to deal with both situations in his classroom.

"Noah, *quick!*" a male voice whispered in Noah's ear, "Go within yourself and use your IS-BE divine spark abilities!"

Noah's eyes shot open, and a light gasp escaped his mouth. The voice whispering in Noah's ear was familiar to him because it was a whispering voice he had heard numerous times before, telling him to use his *IS-BE divine spark abilities*. Noah had always ignored the voice because he had always thought the voice came from the devil, because in Noah's mind, the only source that he needed to *connect* to was God or Jesus. David scratched Noah on his arm, which resulted in Noah yelling out.

"Let me down! Let me down! Let me *down!*" David yelled.

"David, *please!*" Noah pleaded. "Calm down! I have to change you before your dad comes—"

Noah stopped as David collapsed back on the table and kicked Noah in the right eye with his foot.

"Ow! Jesus!" Noah yelled while clutching his right eye.

As his right eye watered, he felt a brief stinging sensation. *God help me with this, please!*

"Noah! Go within yourself and use one of your IS-BE divine spark abilities!" a male voice whispered in Noah's ear again. "Do it *now!* It'll help you know what to do!"

Noah lowered his hand from his right eye and frowned. *Should I listen to him? I don't even know what an IS-BE divine spark ability is.*

"Don't *do* it, Noah!" another male voice whispered in Noah's ear. "That's the devil telling you about IS-BE divine spark abilities! Don't listen! Accept the stress! Accept it! It's God *testing* you!"

Noah sighed as David rolled over onto his stomach, still crying

and struggling to get free from Noah's grasp. With a heavy swing of his hand, David knocked the box of wipes and the container of baby powder on the floor. Noah knew he had to do something to think up which stressful situation he would handle first. Noah knew what to do on any other day regarding making a decision as a teacher but today was different. He had never taken care of a child like David before. The cries of the little girl behind Noah grew louder.

What was he going to do? Take care of David first and neglect the crying little girl behind him? Or neglect David and take care of the little girl, and then deal with David's father, who, no doubt, would be angry over arriving and finding David with a wet diaper on? *Why isn't God helping me think of what to do?*

Noah sucked his teeth and sighed, and almost as if by instinct, he quickly took in a deep breath of air. He took his pointer and middle finger, pressed them firmly together to the center of his forehead, and closed his eyes. Immediately behind his closed eyelids, Noah saw a large, bright, glowing blue Om symbol rushing towards him. As the Om symbol came within inches of him, it burst into a colorful explosion of colors. Within seconds, he felt a calmness rush over him.

His heart rate lowered, and his arms and legs felt light. Amid the calmness was an idea of how to deal with David and the little girl behind him. Upon Noah opening his eyes, he hugged David close and leaned into David's ear as David struggled to escape Noah's arms.

"Gille beag o, gille lag o, Gille beag o nan caorach thu," Noah sang in Gaelic, in a low voice in David's ear. "Gille nan caorachan, gille nan caorachan, Gille nan caorachan, gaolach thu, Gille nan caorachan, gaolach thu."

David's crying quieted within seconds, and he stopped struggling in Noah's arms. Immediately, Noah's eyes widened. How he knew Gaelic was beyond his understanding. English was the only language Noah knew for all his life. Letting out a loud exhale and briefly closing his eyes,

Noah didn't know where the whole idea came from, but he was glad it quieted David's crying tantrum. Now, the only crying Noah heard was from the little girl behind him, but that was okay. He was going to deal with that in a moment.

Pulling David away from him, Noah smiled while wiping away David's streaming tears. While staring directly into David's eyes, Noah handed David a plush Barney toy before lying David down on his back on the table. After locking David down with the changing table strap, Noah rushed over to the children's table and knelt between the little girl and the little boy fighting each other. He knew he wasn't supposed to leave a child unattended on a changing table.

Still, somehow, at that moment, he felt deep within himself that he could do it just that once without anything terrible happening. While the little boy had returned to playing with his puzzle, the girl was still sobbing. Noah wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

"Sweetie, your friend here was playing with the puzzle first," Noah said softly, "but here."

Noah grabbed a large, wooden Tinkerbelle puzzle from a cardboard box under the table and placed it in front of the little girl as she quieted her sobbing.

"Here, isn't this more *exciting* to play with?" Noah asked with a smile.

The little girl gasped with a smile of her own.

"*Tinkerbelle!*" the little girl exclaimed.

"Yeah, fun, right?" Noah asked. "Now, how about you apologize to your buddy? Can you tell him that you're sorry?"

The little girl looked over at the little boy.

"I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"

"Yeah," the little boy replied without ever taking his eyes or his hands off his puzzle.

Noah laughed before hugging the little girl close.

“Awesome, I’m proud of you, sweetheart,” Noah replied before returning to the changing table.

That evening, in the living room of his home, August lay on his sofa, entirely still, his eyes gently shut as he delved into the practice of astral projection. Within moments, a warm, tingling energy enveloped him and coursed through his entire being. In his mind’s eye, he conjured a sparkling, golden aura that wrapped around him. Soon enough, he felt his translucent, ethereal self rise from his physical form and sit upright on the couch.

Although August had ventured into astral projection numerous times before, each experience ignited a thrill within him akin to a child discovering a treasure trove of gifts on Christmas morning. As he opened his eyes to survey his living room, the only illumination came from the radiant moonlight streaming through the open curtains. With a deep breath, he closed his eyes again, and both conjured and envisioned a sun-drenched beach, accompanied by the melodic strains of Irish Celtic music “The Morning Dew/The Musical Priest” by Ardan.” As the music played softly from a nearby stereo, August opened his eyes to find his thoughts brought to manifestation. Before him stretched an endless expanse of golden sand, kissed by the shimmering turquoise waves of the ocean, all beneath the warm embrace of a radiant orange sun. Towering palm trees swayed gently in the breeze.

The soothing melody of “The Morning Dew/The Musical Priest” by Ardan filled his ears, prompting him to close his eyes once more, inhale deeply, and smile. Despite Samantha’s absence, he still felt enveloped in his own paradise. With a flicker of thought, August envisioned a beach chair and a small table topped with a refreshing piña colada.

To his delight, they materialized instantly. As the song transitioned to Lionel Richie's "All Night Long," he strolled over, settled into the chair, and savored a few sips of his drink with a smile. Leaning back, he closed his eyes again, manifesting himself wearing a pair of sunglasses, and allowed the serene ambiance to wash over him while displaying a content smile. After a few minutes, he found himself falling into a light sleep.

However, tranquility was short-lived; a sudden, piercing shout shattered the calm, jolting him awake. He shot upright and snatched his sunglasses off; his heart raced as he saw his idyllic beach dissolve into a grim landscape of cracked, dark gray gravel, overshadowed by a tumultuous, stormy sky.

Every few seconds, blinding flashes of white lightning illuminated the oppressive gloom. At the same time, the air grew thick with an unbearable heat. The thunder that roared around him was a cacophony that vibrated through his bones. Realizing he had slipped from his dreamlike haven into a nightmarish realm, he dropped his sunglasses onto the sand and sprang from his chair with his heart pounding. To his left, a horrifying sight met his eyes: a man August didn't recognize, was being dragged away by monstrous, serpent-like creatures with lion heads, their scales glistening ominously in the dim light.

"No! No, let me go! Let me go! Let me go, damn it!" the man shouted, his voice thick with desperation.

As the man took sight of August, the man's eyes widened.

"Help!" the man shouted. "Help me! Help! Help!"

August's eyes widened in horror as he witnessed two of the serpents sink their fangs deep into the man's legs, resulting in blood spraying in a gruesome arc and causing the man to let out an anguished yell. Though August had no prior knowledge of who the man was, the urgency of the situation was apparent; the man was in dire need of rescue, and the malevolent snakes dragging him away were

unmistakably evil. Without hesitation, August sprinted towards the chaos, but as the snakes noticed August's approaching, one of them lashed out with its elongated, forked tongue, striking August squarely in the chest with a blinding blue energy.

The impact sent August hurtling backward and crashing into the wall of his living room with a bone-jarring thud. Gasping for breath, August clutched his chest, succumbing to a violent coughing fit that left his face flushed and his heart racing. For a few agonizing seconds, a searing pain radiated through August's chest, and though he could still faintly hear the man's desperate yelling, the room around him was eerily empty. Suddenly, the cacophony of the man's yelling ceased, plunging the living room into an unsettling silence.

Struggling to get to his feet, August groaned and pressed a hand to his forehead, feeling a wave of dizziness wash over him. He stumbled to the sofa and collapsed onto it, his mind racing with the realization of what had just transpired. August had encountered souls—or IS-BEs—from the afterlife before but never had one reached out to him with such panic as the man being dragged away. Typically, the connections August made with IS-BEs were for guidance or advice. But in that moment, it felt as though the man's soul was pleading for urgent help—a haunting cry that echoed painfully in August's mind.

Under the weary sky of late evening, Noah emerged from Takoma Montessori. Each step was punctuated by a yawn that seemed to draw the day's fatigue out of him and into the open air. He drifted, almost aimlessly, around to the front of the school, where a bench offered a momentary haven. Sitting down, he removed his sneaker from his right foot and was immediately met with a sharp, biting sensation that seemed to gnaw at the very fibers of his muscles. He began to knead the

arch of his foot, where the pain centralized, feeling as if a thousand tiny needles were pricking his skin from the inside out. Each touch and rub seemed to delve deeper, unearthing layers of discomfort that accumulated throughout the day.

The pain was not just a simple ache, but a complex tapestry of agony that wove through his foot, sending jolts of electric-like shocks with every movement. It was as if his muscles were tangled in knots, each tighter and more unforgiving than the last, rebelling against the day's exertions. As he massaged harder, trying to alleviate the intensity, the sensation morphed into a dull, throbbing pulse that resonated with his heartbeat. This relentless throb felt as though a heavyweight was methodically pounding against his sole, each thump reverberating through his leg, echoing a deep, resounding ache that seemed to mock his attempts at relief.

His back, too, was a battleground of pain. The sensation in his back was less of a throb and more of a constant, crushing pressure as if an invisible vice was slowly tightening around his spine. It was a gnawing, persistent pain that seemed to clamp down with every breath he took, making even the simple act of sitting up straight an ordeal. The muscles along his lower back felt twisted and strained, like overwrought cords threatening to snap under the burden of the day's physical demands. The complex orchestra of pain—sharp jabs, throbbing aches, and crushing pressures—was a stark testament to the physical toll of Noah's day, a relentless reminder of the endurance required to navigate his responsibilities.

"Hunter," Lilith, his boss, called out as she opened the door to the center and stuck her head out of the doorway, "wait a moment before you leave."

Noah stopped, a frown creasing his forehead as he squeezed his eyes shut. The use of his last name grated on him, a fact that Lilith was all too aware of, given how often he had expressed his disdain. It struck

him as overly formal, almost militaristic, to be addressed in such a manner. However, he understood that she wielded this power because of her position as his superior, a dynamic that only fueled his irritation. He shook his head, dismissing the annoyance as a mere test of his patience. He turned to face her, raising a brow while forcing a fleeting smile that barely masked his discomfort.

“Noah,” he said in an icy tone.

Lilith contrived a brief smile as her gaze went downward and away from him.

“Sorry, Noah, look, can you come in a little early for the next two weeks?”

Noah sighed, shook his head, and rolled his eyes. *Is she serious? I come in early every day as it is. Eight a.m., how much earlier can I come than that?*

“How early?” Noah asked.

“At six a.m., we need you to cover Rebekah’s room because she’ll be coming in at ten instead of six for the next two weeks.”

Noah’s jaw tightened as he stared at the ground with a frown, his mind contemplating the daunting realities of his daily routine. The journey from his home to his workplace consumed an hour and twenty-five minutes each day.

To be at work at six a.m., he would have to get up at three-thirty a.m. and leave his home by four-thirty a.m. Working from six o’clock a.m. until six-thirty p.m., factoring in his lunch break, meant enduring eleven grueling hours of labor. To compound matters, David was not the only autistic child in Rebekah’s class; every child under her care was autistic. Noah frowned, pinched his eyes, and exhaled loudly. The mere thought of managing ten children akin to David for eleven hours every day over the next two weeks left him feeling exasperated. *God, I’m tired of this job.* He cleared his throat and stared at her with a contrived smile, striving to uphold the Christian forbearance instilled in him since childhood.

"All right, sure, will do."

"Great, thanks, Hun—I mean, Noah."

Before Noah could respond, Lilith shut the door with a soft thud, leaving him standing there, his shoulders drooping as if bearing the weight of the world. He trudged towards his two thousand Kia Rio parked in the lot, each step heavy with resignation. Sliding into the front seat, he clenched the steering wheel, a deep frown etched into his brow, his breaths quickening as a knot tightened in his throat. He blinked rapidly, but the tears betrayed him, stinging the corners of his vivid green eyes.

Eleven-hour shifts for two weeks straight loomed like a dark cloud over him, and he felt it gnawing at his body and mind. His eyes rolled, frustration mixing with despair as tears flowed from his eyes. Only God knew the turmoil in his heart. He didn't want to spend his days mired in a relentless cycle of caring for toddlers for a mere ten dollars an hour. Deep down, a restless urge clawed at him, whispering for him to do something greater with his life—something meaningful, purposeful, *fulfilling*.

Yet, every time he tried to ponder on his urge, his thoughts spiraled back to familiar paths of Christianity as if it were a leash tugging him away from the possibilities he craved. *Is that really what's happening?* His eyes widened as the thought sent a shiver down his spine. Shaking his head, he let out a breathed laugh tinged with disbelief. No, he couldn't let himself spiral down that way. Whatever was blocking his ponderings *wasn't* Christianity. He was sure of it.

"Pain is God's *will*, Noah, remember that. Pain is *purpose*! Hurt and *pain* is *purpose*!" a small voice whispered in Noah's ear, resulting in Noah frowning.

It wasn't Noah's first time hearing a whispering voice telling him things like that. He heard it all the time, and each time he heard it, he knew it was God speaking to him, directing him, guiding him. Hearing

his phone vibrate, he pulled it out of the side pocket of his jeans and flipped open the cover. He tapped on the new text message notification displayed on his phone.

“Noah Hunter, this is Dominion Energy contacting you again to discuss your account. To avoid disconnection, please call 866-366-4357.”

Clenching his jaw, Noah slammed down the cover on his phone and tossed the phone onto the front passenger seat before rolling his eyes. It wasn't as if he was purposely trying not to pay the electric bill. It was just that he only made six hundred and ninety-six dollars on his last paycheck. After putting that together with Leah's seven-hundred-dollar paycheck to pay the rent, they both had nothing left over to pay anything else.

Closing his eyes, he sighed. *God, something's gotta give. There's gotta be something better than living like this; there has to be.* Opening his eyes, he clutched his stomach, feeling a mild burning, stabbing pain. He knew it was the pain of fear and worry. Starting his car, Noah knew the only thing that could make him feel better was church, and if he didn't leave that parking lot right then and there, he would be late getting there.

While driving down Broad Street in Richmond, Noah scanned through radio stations for classical music or an engaging talk radio show. With a brow raised, his attention sparked when he heard the voice of an older man.

“I'm your host, George Norson, and tonight on Shore to Shore AM,” the older man announced, “we're talking to August Cameron. He's a best-selling author, a former VCU professor, and a researcher of ancient history and extraterrestrial theories. He recently opened a drug and alcohol rehab center that also serves as a homeless shelter in Glen Allen. He says it's dedicated to helping people experiencing homelessness and

aiding alcoholics and drug addicts in recovery. However, tonight, he's on Shore to Shore to explain the basics of something very interesting that I'll let him explain himself. So, without further ado, welcome, August."

Noah rolled his eyes, sighed, and reached for his Sirius car radio tuner button. He was about to change the station, but he stopped. For some reason, deep within him, Noah was curious to hear what August had to say. He didn't know why, but he just was. Some small, tiny force within him was urging him not to change the station—so he didn't.

"Thanks, George, for having me on," August said.

"Yeah, thank you for *being* on, so, August," George said, "tell us more about something called—Maltheism and why you believe in it."

"Well," August replied, "Maltheism is the belief that there is an evil god that exists and *that* God, I and other Maltheists genuinely believe, is the God of the Bible. Here's why I've personally come to feel this way. God is responsible for two *hundred* and fifty million deaths. So, it baffles me how millions of believers claim that God is good when the evidence from his behaviors and teachings are so comprehensively the opposite."

Noah's eyes widened, and he shook his head at what he was hearing. Just hearing someone calling God evil made him want to vomit. However, Noah wanted to hear more of what August was saying, to see if August could sound even more ridiculous than he already did.

"Throughout the Bible, George," August continued, "there are numerous accounts of God dishing out divine punishment through genocide, plagues, ethnic cleansing, and the like. Now, if the Bible is the *true* word of God, as Christians say, then that *means* that God supports infanticide, slavery, torture, genocide, and all manner of death, destruction, and suffering, including rape. Also, in almost every church, especially black churches, you hear the pastor and the congregation using the phrase, God is good—*all* the time—"

"All the time, yeah," George cut in in a light, almost humorous

tone.

“Yeah,” August said. “Um—*what*? All the time this supposedly loving, caring god is *good*? The four *hundred* years black people spent in torturous servitude of slavery—*all* the time? The numerous years Jews were tortured and murdered—*all* the time? The hundreds of people who died on nine-eleven—*all* the time? The countless children who are at Saint Jude’s Hospital *right now*, suffering in *anguish* as cancer *ravages* their insides—*all* the time? And what about the Irish, who centuries ago were treated as *slaves*, some of whom were killed just for trying to *survive*? Yet and still, *all* the time God is good? An amazing example of how God is *not* good all the time, or *any* time, is the South Carolina church shooting. Remember that?”

“Yeah, I do,” George responded, “It was in twenty-fifteen—”

“Right,” August interjected, “now, you would *think* that the *one* place, George, where Christians would be safe from danger would be the church, which is supposedly *his own* house, and yet God didn’t even *bother* to protect the *very ones* who were in *his* house, trying to serve *him*—yet God is good *all* the time? No, God is good *none* of the time. In fact, the Bible, in Ephesians 6:5 and Colossians 3:12, instructs black slaves to *obey* their slave masters, which is—unbelievably *disgusting*. Never mind the fact that during slavery, while the *slaves* were praying to God, so were the slave masters.

The slaves were praying for freedom, and the *slave masters* were praying and asking for God to allow them to continue to do the ‘good job’ of being slave masters—and which prayers did God answer? Surely not the prayers of the slaves—yet God is *good*—*all* the time? No, he’s not. Also, God supposedly can cure *all* these ailments, diseases, and illnesses by invoking miracles, yet he chooses not to.

In the Bible, Jesus uses his alleged power to cure *one* leper victim rather than eliminate leprosy altogether. He’ll feed five thousand with bread and fish but won’t eliminate starvation and hunger *completely*.

He'll make a blind man see but leave *countless* others still blind. You see? What people don't realize is that all of this is because the God of the Bible is really evil. In fact, he's really a deity called the Demiurge or Yaldabaoth."

Noah's eyes widened, and then he frowned at hearing the name *Demiurge*. He had heard it once before—no, actually, *several* times before from Christopher.

"The god of the Bible—the Demiurge created this material realm—this *planet* that we call Earth," August continued, "and what people don't realize is that this Earth is a simulated prison planet—"

"Okay," George interrupted, "hold on, let's go back a little. So then—if God—or the *Demiurge* as you call him, is evil, then what about heaven and hell? Where do people go after death?"

"Well," August replied, "here's what I'd call—a *truthful* belief that I discovered several months back and, as a result, have been doing extensive research on every day. When you die, you'll almost always see a bright, white light, and in the middle of that white light, you'll be shown angels alongside passed on loved ones, friends, spirit guides, ascended masters, or even whatever religious messiah you worshiped in your life. Okay, but here's the thing—the religious messiah, the angels, the spirit guides, the ascended masters, the passed on loved ones, and the friends you see will *all* be fake illusions to get you to *agree* to go into the white light.

Once you follow those supposed angels, those spirit guides, those ascended masters, those loved ones, and or that messiah into the white light, you'll be shown a life review. That means you'll be shown everything you did in your life. Only what you'll be shown won't be your life. It'll be the life of someone else, and the Demiurge does this deception to make you think you lived so much of a bad, horrible life that you must—"

Noah pressed his radio tuner button off in anger. He had heard

about as much ridiculous garbage as he could bear from August Cameron. Noah *knew* that all Christians, upon death, went to heaven, while all non-Christians, upon death, went to hell. Nothing nor no one was going to change his mind on that. Glancing down at his gas gauge, it wasn't empty yet, but it was close to it.

Glancing at his watch, he knew he had a few minutes to fill up his car at a gas station. He only had twenty dollars in his wallet, but that would be enough to get gas to take him to Bible study and work on Monday, which was payday. Pulling into a Shell gas station, Noah parked at the first gas pump and headed inside. He sucked his teeth and rolled his eyes as he stood in line behind an older woman, holding the hand of her seven-year-old girl at the counter. *God, please let them be fast. I only have twenty-five minutes.*

"Ma'am, I'm sorry," a female cashier said to the older woman, "if you don't have the money, I can't sell this to you—"

"Yeah, but miss, *please?*" the older woman pleaded with tears in her eyes. "I only have five dollars, I know, but it's for my daughter—"

"Look, I'm sorry, but no!" the cashier yelled. "Now, go! You're holding up the line!"

Noah glanced over at the seven-year-old, who looked up at the older woman with tearful eyes.

"Mama, you promised," the seven-year-old said tearfully, "it's my birthday."

Noah's brows furrowed at seeing the older woman and her daughter.

"I know, sweetie—let's go. We can talk about it outside. Come on," the older woman replied while walking away from the counter.

Noah looked at the twenty-dollar bill in his hand. He would only have enough to make it to church and back that night if he gave what he had to help pay for the woman's items. However, looking at the tears falling down the faces of the older woman and the seven-year-old, Noah

knew he had to help them. His heart wouldn't let him refuse to help them, no matter how much it would have taken away from him.

"Ma'am, hold on," Noah said as he touched the older woman's arm. "How much do you need to pay for your items?"

The older woman looked up at Noah with tearful eyes and smiled before shaking her head.

"Just ten dollars more, but that lady won't budge, so—"

"I'll pay the ten for you. Come on," Noah said as he stepped closer to the counter.

"Really?" the seven-year-old exclaimed with a smile. "Thanks, mister!"

"Yeah," Noah said, "I—"

"No," the older woman interjected. "No, wait, sir, you don't have to do that. I *couldn't* have you do that—"

"No, but I want to," Noah said, "it's her birthday, and I know how hard times are these days. What kind of Christian would I be if I didn't help you?"

Noah turned to the cashier.

"Here, with her five and the ten out of my twenty, this should cover the payment," Noah told the cashier as he handed her his twenty-dollar bill. "And can I get ten on pump one, please?"

"Okay, thanks for shopping at Shell," the cashier said, handing the older woman her bagged items.

Walking out of the station with Noah, the older woman hugged Noah while breaking into light sobs.

"Thank you!" the older woman said tearfully.

"Yeah, thanks, mister," the seven-year-old said.

Noah smiled as the older woman released him from the hug.

"No problem," Noah responded before stooping down in front of the seven-year-old and smiling, "and happy birthday to you, little one. I hope you have a wonderful birthday night."

The seven-year-old wrapped her arms around Noah and hugged him, taking Noah aback.

"Thank you, mister," the seven-year-old whispered.

"You're welcome, sweetheart," Noah said with a smile.

As the seven-year-old released him from the hug, Noah stood.

"Well, have a great night," Noah said.

"Thanks, we will now."

As Noah walked away, the smile on his face remained. At that moment, it didn't matter to him that he no longer had the gas money to make it to work that Monday. The smile that he saw on that seven-year-old's face was worth it. In fact, that seven-year-old reminded him of his own daughter. As he approached his car and started pumping gas into it, he kept staring at his watch every fifteen seconds, worrying that he'd be late for church.

And then what will people think, Noah? They'll think you don't take God as seriously as you do. That's what they'll think. Noah closed his eyes as the gas pump continued pumping, took a deep breath in, held it for a few seconds, and then exhaled—and that's when he felt it, the coldness of something steel and hard pressing into the back of his neck, a coldness that made him gasp and tense up immediately.

"Quick, motherfucker! Turn around, put the fucking gas pump back in the dispenser, and give me all the fucking money you have on you, *including* the keys to your car!" a male voice yelled behind him.

Noah's eyes widened as the man's words struck him like a thunderclap, sending a jolt of fear coursing through him. He swallowed hard as his heart raced, and adrenaline surged through his veins. He was caught in a whirlwind of panic, grappling with the instinct to comply versus the urge to resist. Noah frowned and blinked slowly. His face turned red. Biting down on the side of his lip, he felt trapped in a moment that felt both surreal and terrifying.

"Now, motherfucker!" the man yelled.

“Okay! Okay!” Noah yells, his voice shaky. “Just don’t do anything rash.”

“Man, *shut the fuck up!*” the man hollered. “Don’t tell me what the *fuck* to do! Turn the *fuck* around and give me your *fucking* money and keys!”

Noah turned around to return the gas pump to its dispenser and let out a shaky breath as a chill slithered down his spine. There, looming before him, was a figure cloaked in darkness, a ski mask obscuring any hint of humanity. The glint of a pistol aimed squarely at his face made him physically freeze in place. His breath hitched in his throat. A heavy sweat broke out on his forehead as panic surged through him like wildfire, igniting every nerve ending. He swallowed hard as his mouth turned to sand.

His legs trembled beneath him, threatening to collapse. He clutched his chest, feeling the frantic thump of his heart echoing in his ears, a grim reminder that he was teetering on the edge of oblivion. In that harrowing moment, Noah understood the futility of his situation. No amount of money or keys would spare him from the malevolence that radiated from the masked man. Swallowing hard again with a sour face, he could almost taste the impending doom, a bitter tang that filled his mouth as he realized that his life hung by a thread, ready to snap at the slightest provocation.

Noah closed his eyes for a few seconds. *What should I do? God, tell me what to do!* Opening his eyes, he widened them as his gaze darted left, right, and finally behind him, each glance wilder and more frantic than the last. Clenching his jaw, he balled his fists as his frustration boiled over, seething at the realization that he was utterly alone at the desolate station. The cashier inside had vanished too, leaving the counter eerily empty. In that haunting silence, he understood the grim truth: *no one* would come to his aid and save him from the danger in front of him.

“Give him the keys and whatever money you have, Noah!” a male voice yelled in his ear. “It’s what God wants you to do. The man might let you *live*!”

“No!” Noah heard another male voice shout in his ear. “Forget the ridiculous God talk! Right now, you’re in the middle of an Archon *attack*! Go within yourself and use one of your IS-BE divine spark abilities! It will give you the power to fight against this archon-possessed man and *win*! Do it! Do it *now*!”

“I’m going to count to fucking *three*!” the man shouted, “and if you don’t give me your fucking keys and money by the time I get to three, I’m *murking* your ass! *One*!”

Noah stood frozen. His eyes widened in shock as he stared at the man before him. He didn’t know which inner voice to listen to. Suddenly, the man grabbed Noah by the shirt and forcefully slammed him against the car behind him. At that moment, Noah’s instincts took over. He shut his eyes tightly, furrowing his brow, and in his mind’s eye, he envisioned a magnificent, shimmering blue pineal gland with a large, luminous white Om symbol at its center. Scorching energy coursed through him like a raging tsunami, engulfing his body in searing heat.

“Two!” the man shouted. “When I get to three, you’re *dead*, motherfucker!”

Noah’s eyes snapped open, and without thinking, he thrust his arm forward, palm outstretched. A massive, swirling orb of deep blue fire, crackling with golden electricity, erupted from his hand with a deafening whoosh. It slammed into the man’s chest, sending him hurtling several feet through the air before dropping to the ground, unconscious. Noah’s eyes widened in shock as the fiery sphere dissipated into nothingness. *Oh my God! What just happened? How did I do that?* He stared at his hand as if it belonged to someone else, utterly bewildered by the inexplicable display of power. Instead of lingering to unravel the mystery, Noah flung open his car door, leaped inside, ignited

the engine, and peeled away, leaving behind the screeching echo of his tires.

As Noah drove down the street, his trembling hands gripped the steering wheel. He clenched his jaw with a frown before letting out a shuddering breath as his body felt icy cold. The scene with the man at the gas station repeatedly replayed in his mind. *Who was it that kept giving him thoughts about IS-BE divine spark abilities? And how was it that he was able to knock a man unconscious just by extending his arm and outstretching his hand? How did he get fire in the palm of his hand? What is going on here? God, please talk to me! What in the world is going on with me?* Noah prayed that God would answer him, if not right then and there, at some point during the night. He *needed* answers.

It was close to seven-thirty in the evening as Noah walked into the downstairs hallway of Faith Landmarks Bible Church, with Pastor Thomas Owens walking on one side of him and Deacon Carl Miller walking on the other. Pastor Thomas smirked as he wrapped his arm around Noah's shoulder.

"So, are you excited about leading tonight's Bible study?" Pastor Thomas asked.

Noah tilted his head with a nod and a nervous smirk.

"Well, excited isn't exactly the word I'd use. I'm more—*petrified*."

"Oh hey," Deacon Miller replied, "you'll do fine. Just let the Lord lead and guide you."

"I will," Noah replied with a smile and a nod, "thank you."

"Sure," Deacon Carl replied with a smile, "Now, excuse me, gentleman, I have to get my Bible from the car."

As Noah watched Deacon Carl walk away, Noah frowned and looked away briefly.

“Hey, Pastor Thomas,” Noah said, “let me ask you something. Does God ever give people—supernatural gifts?”

Pastor Thomas frowned with a brow raised for a few seconds before nodding slowly.

“Hmm, sometimes,” Pastor Thomas responded, “sometimes in the form of discernment or the gift to prophesy—”

“What about other gifts?” Noah cut in.

“Such as?”

After clearing his throat, Noah sighed with a brief close of his eyes, trying to muster the courage to say what he still couldn’t believe had occurred earlier himself.

“Earlier tonight, someone tried to rob me at gunpoint,” Noah said.

“Oh no!” exclaimed Pastor Thomas, his eyes widening slightly. “What happened?”

“I was at the gas station, and this guy sneaked up behind me, pressed a gun to the back of my neck, and demanded my keys and all the money I had.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, an inner voice urged me to tap into some kind of—IS-BE divine spark ability.”

“Witchcraft!” shouted Pastor Thomas, his eyes widening further.

“What? Was it really?” Noah responded; his brows raised.

“Well, of course it was!” Pastor Thomas answered while shaking his head and frowning. “God doesn’t *deal* with any IS-BE or divine spark—*anything*, or any abilities that come with it. That’s supernatural satanic *garbage!*”

Looking down and away from Pastor Thomas, Noah sighed with a brief close of his eyes and slumped shoulders.

“Oh,” Noah responded in a low, dejected tone.

“Yes, you *mustn’t* take part in *any* of that, Noah. It’s absolutely a

sin!”

Noah rolled his eyes and sucked his teeth. Of course, it was a sin; how did Noah not know otherwise?

“Noah, did you participate in any *witchcraft* tonight?” Pastor Thomas asked in a sharp, accusatory tone.

Noah shot his eyes up at Pastor Thomas with a frown and a shake of his head.

“No! Of course not—”

“Oh *good*! Thank God!” Pastor Thomas said before sighing with a smile.

Noah immediately mentally berated himself for telling Pastor Thomas a lie, but he had no choice. He knew he would have to repent later because he couldn’t admit to his pastor that he had allowed himself to participate in such an evil sin.

“You know,” Pastor Thomas said, “I—”

Pastor Thomas stopped as Noah’s cell phone rang, and Noah knew from the “Awesome God” by Rich Mullins ringtone that it was his wife calling.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Pastor, I have to take this; it’s my wife calling.”

“Sure, no problem. I’ll see you upstairs,” Pastor Thomas replied with a smile before patting Noah on the back and walking away towards a nearby stairway.

“Hey, honey,” Noah responded to his wife, “where are you? I thought you’d be here by now.”

“I thought so too, but my car broke down over in the Gilpin Court area, so I need you to pick me up.”

“*Gilpin Court*?” Noah’s voice rose. “Leah, do you know what kind of neighborhood that is? Especially at night—”

“I *know*, that’s why I need you to come get me. AAA’s coming to tow the car away, and I can wait for you inside this Tiger Market that I’m in front of, where I’d be safe—”

“Whoa, whoa, I can’t. I’m fifteen seconds away from leading Bible study.”

“Yeah, but Noah, I’m stuck out here.”

“Yeah, I know, but can’t you just—call an Uber or a Lyft? I mean, I really can’t flake out on God like this.”

“Noah, I’m your *wife* out here. What’s more important? Me? Or God and Bible study?”

Noah didn’t want to answer her because he knew the answer would break Leah’s heart.

“Leah, come on, don’t do that to me—”

“Oh my God! You know what? *Forget* it. I’ll get an Uber or a Lyft to take me *home*. Bye, Noah.”

“Leah, no, wait, okay—”

Before Noah could say another word, he heard the call disconnect. He sighed with a frown of guilt.

God, am I doing the right thing? Should I leave here and go pick her up? After a few seconds, he shook his head, and his frown vanished. No, he wasn’t leaving Bible study, no matter if it was his wife or not. He remembered his lifelong promise he made to God to never to put anything or anyone in front of his Lord and Savior, including his wife and daughter. One of Noah’s favorite Bible scriptures was Proverbs 3:6, which said, “In everything you do, put God first.” That was just what Noah intended to keep doing.

Noah’s heart raced as he stood at the altar of Faith Landmarks Bible Church, reading from Matthew six-twenty-four. He clutched his stomach, feeling it shoot up into his chest. After inhaling and exhaling a breath, Noah looked up at the hundreds of members attending the night’s Bible study. Reading the last sentence of the verse, he sighed and

closed his eyes briefly, asking God in silence to remove the nervousness flowing through him at that moment. After a second or two, Noah opened his eyes.

“So, what do we understand from reading Matthew six-twenty-four?” Noah asked the congregation as he walked around the podium that he stood behind. “What we understand is that we indeed can’t serve two masters. We can’t serve God and Satan at the same time. We can’t go out and party and drink alcohol on Friday and Saturday night and then come to church on Sunday morning, shouting hallelujah, amen?”

“Amen!” some congregation members said in unison, with a few others who applauded.

“In fact, we shouldn’t even be drinking alcohol, period,” Noah said with a nod and a smirk. “No matter how tasty it supposedly is—I wouldn’t know because I’ve never had an alcoholic drink in my entire life—and no matter what holiday or family gathering we’re celebrating. That includes your mother-in-law’s birthday party that your wife forces you to attend every year.”

Walking around the podium, Noah laughed with the church congregation.

“For one, it’s because our body is supposed to be a temple for the lord,” Noah continued, “and with that being the case, we’re supposed to keep our temple pure and holy for him. Secondly, another word for alcohol is spirits, and think about it—just what kind of spirits are we *entertaining* into our temples for the lord? It could be demonic spirits, thus why we shouldn’t drink at all.”

“Amen!” all the church congregation members shouted again.

As the impenetrable darkness enveloped the Gilpin Court area, Leah

remained huddled inside her car, her windows sealed as if to keep the night's malevolence at bay. Merely a few feet away, Tiger Market loomed—a small, decrepit corner store that seemed to attract the damned. It was as if it were a gathering place for the lost souls of the city, where vagabonds and addicts congregated like moths to a flame. Some of them were shadows against the dim light, their figures distorted as they indulged in their vices, their laughter and banter echoing hollowly, a macabre soundtrack to the night.

Others huddled together, engaged in games of craps. Leah's gaze darted from shadow to shadow. She clutched her chest and swallowed hard, feeling her heart pounding in her chest. The boundary between her supposed safety within the car and the lurking danger outside blurred as the night whispered of terrors yet unseen. In the dim twilight, almost every building lining the street was marred by sinister graffiti, symbols of gang allegiance spray-painted like warnings in the night. The air was thick with the heavy beats of rap music, echoing ominously from the shadowed depths of the street's end, where light dared not tread. She gasped, and her heart skipped a beat when she spotted three figures emerging from the darkness.

Their presence was symbolized by the chilling uniformity of blue bandanas, jeans, and shirts; their dreads swaying like specters in the faint light. Their eyes met hers, cold and unyielding, and as she let out a shuttering breath, a sharp shiver of terror went down her spine. She recognized the figures instantly—they were harbingers of the gang that claimed the streets as their own.

She shut her eyes tightly, whispering a desperate prayer to the vast universe for her Uber to arrive swiftly. However, her silent wish was shattered by a cacophony of unsettling, resonant chirps that erupted from outside her front passenger window, a sound reminiscent of a thousand crickets in a frenzied chorus, growing increasingly deafening with each heartbeat. When she finally dared to glance to her right, her

eyes flew open in horror at the sight that loomed just a few feet away—a grotesque, elongated figure, black and spindly, resembling a monstrous tick, its long, glistening tail adorned with menacing, jagged thorns. Its eyes, enormous and slanted, were void of any light, while its gaping maw displayed a row of elongated, razor-sharp teeth, slick with a thick, black ichor that dripped ominously. Her eyes widened as the more she gazed at this abomination, the more terror surged within her. Her hands quaked uncontrollably; her breaths came in ragged gasps, and though every instinct screamed for her to look away, she found herself trapped by its unyielding gaze.

Tears blurred her vision, not from sorrow but from the overwhelming dread that consumed her, a palpable force that she could no longer ignore. She clutched her chest with her right hand, feeling her heart thumping wildly, a frenetic drumbeat echoing ominously in her ears. Her left fist clenched so tightly that her nails bit into her palm, drawing blood that felt ice cold against her skin. Each breath became a Herculean effort, as if unseen hands were slowly squeezing the very life out of her.

Beads of cold sweat formed on her forehead, merging into rivulets that traced the contours of her face. She squeezed her eyes shut; lips pressed tightly together in a vain attempt to stifle a yawn, a clear sign of her body betraying her. Seconds later, she snapped her eyes open, now wide with terror. Leah realized with chilling clarity that the creature lurking in the shadows was weaving a sinister spell, attempting to lull her into a deep, vulnerable slumber—or worse, render her unconscious.

She didn't understand its motives, but an instinctual fear screamed within her that succumbing to the darkness would be her end. She had to resist; she had to fight against the creeping oblivion with every fiber of her being, for she knew the creature was waiting, just waiting for her to close her eyes one last time. A chilling, otherworldly

wail echoed through the night, sending shivers down Leah's spine as glass shattering pierced the air to her left.

As she whipped her head around, her breath caught in her throat at the sight of a gaunt figure cloaked in shadow, a hood obscuring his face, looming ominously by her driver's side door. In his right hand, he gripped a gun while his left fumbled desperately at the lock, a sinister intent radiating from his every movement. Panic surged through her veins as she screamed, tearing off her seat belt and lunging towards the passenger side, desperate to escape the encroaching darkness that threatened to swallow her whole.

Her gaze locked onto the figure lurking just a few feet from her car, a sinister grin twisting across its face. As she instinctively reached for the handle of the passenger door, a sharp crack shattered the stillness, and pain erupted in her back as the man shot Leah. In a heartbeat, another bullet found its mark, this time striking the back of her head.

The creature dissipated into a swirling cloud of darkness, leaving only chaos. The man, devoid of any humanity, flung open the driver's side door, yanked Leah's lifeless form by her hair, and discarded her onto the ground like a forgotten toy. With a swift motion, he snatched her purse from the car and sprinted away, the wailing sirens drawing closer, echoing the horror of the moment.

As the sanctuary wall clock approached ten o'clock, Noah descended into the kitchen of Faith Landmarks Bible Church, accompanied by Pastor Thomas and Sister Carolyn, who greeted him with a warm smile and a gentle pat on the back.

"Noah, you did wonderful during Bible study tonight," Carolyn praised him, her eyes sparkling. "I took so much away from the service."

“Well, all the glory belongs to Christ. He’s the one who guided my words tonight,” Noah replied, smiling.

Pastor Thomas nodded in agreement.

“Absolutely!” Pastor Thomas exclaimed. “Hey, since you both are here, let me take you to the spot for this weekend’s bake sale.”

As Pastor Thomas and Carolyn walked ahead, Noah stepped forward to follow, but just then, his phone buzzed, causing him to stop. Sighing with a brief close of his eyes, a wave of apprehension washed over him. He hadn’t heard the familiar Rich Mullins ringtone, yet he instinctively knew it was his wife calling, likely upset. Glancing at the caller ID, he frowned with a brow raised as he noticed the name of Bon Secours St. Mary’s Hospital displayed on the screen.

“Hello?” he answered.

“Hi, I’m looking for Noah Hunter,” a male voice responded.

“This is he, who’s calling?”

“This is Dr. Michaels from Bon Secours St. Mary’s Hospital. It’s about your wife.”

CHAPTER FOUR

When Noah pulled into the parking lot of Bon Secours St. Mary's Hospital, he couldn't get out of his car fast enough. His thoughts were a chaotic whirlwind of fear and apprehension. He grimaced as he rushed past the ER doors, and every step felt like running through quicksand. As Noah walked up to the nurse's station, his breaths were heavy as he felt a wave of panic wash over him.

He clutched his chest, feeling it pounding like a fierce drum, echoing his escalating fear. He squeezed the edge of the desk with his right hand as his legs trembled uncontrollably. His hands shook, sweat beaded his forehead and face as his entire body felt aflame with a feverish heat. He swallowed hard as his throat felt parched, a telltale sign of his inner turmoil. The nurse behind the desk, noticing his distress, met his gaze with a nod of understanding.

"Hi, sir. How can I help you?"

"Hi, um, my name is Noah Hunter, and I just got a call that my wife was here and I—"

Noah stopped as the nurse, sensing the urgency in his voice, quickly ran over and sought out Dr. Michaels, a distinctly handsome young man whose confident, focused expression offered a strange mix of reassurance and professional authority. Dr. Michaels walked over to Noah, and with a gentle hand on his shoulder, tried to guide him toward a semblance of calm.

"Mr. Hunter, I'm Dr. Michaels, let's talk in the waiting room," Dr. Michaels said.

"No, where's Leah?"

Dr. Michaels looked at him with a sad frown and softened eyes

that were a prelude to the crushing blow that was to be delivered.

“Dr. Michaels, is she okay?”

The silence that followed was deafening. A void in Noah's worst fears echoed. The shake of Dr. Michaels' head and the sorrow in his eyes was a language of loss that no words needed to convey. Noah's eyes widened as he felt the ground slip away beneath him. As Dr. Michaels continued to talk, his voice became a distant echo, with only a few words piercing the fog of Noah's shock—words that confirmed Noah's worst fear—Leah, his everything, was *gone*.

At that moment, as Noah dropped to the floor and released a loud, ear-piercing cry, the world as Noah knew it had shattered into a million pieces. The future he and Leah envisioned together, their plans, were now forever dissolved into a reality he couldn't accept. As Dr. Michaels hugged him close, numbness enveloped Noah. Dr. Michaels' embrace was cold and meaningless as his heart broke into permanent, irreparable fragments. The news, no, the *revelation* that his wife was now deceased, signaled that Noah's life would never be the same again.

As Noah sat in the waiting room, he frowned and rocked back and forth, feeling the world's weight pressing down on him. Each second seemed to stretch into eternity. As he shut his eyes tight, his mind replayed the final exchange with Leah, their words a haunting melody that now only brought tears streaming from his eyes upon opening them. With every memory, Noah gasped and balled his fists, feeling a sharp pang of grief pierce through him. At that moment of overwhelming pain, he pressed his fists against his temples repeatedly, a futile attempt to silence his thoughts.

The raw reality of his situation was undeniable, an unbearable truth that refused to be anything but mercilessly real. As he hugged his

arms to his body, the grief wrapped around him like a relentless force that squeezed tighter with each breath. Noah's sobs broke the heavy silence of the room, each one a testament to the love lost and the void that now consumed him. Then, Dr. Michaels approached, offering a simple coffee in hand.

"Here, I thought you could use this," Dr. Michaels said.

"No, I don't want coffee," Noah said in a low, tearful voice.

"It'll make you feel at least a little better—"

"I said I don't *want* coffee, so just leave me *alone*!"

Dr. Michaels sighed and then nodded.

"Well, if you need someone to talk to—"

"No, I *don't*! So, *leave me alone, all right*!"

"Okay, okay, well, when you're ready, there are some necessary forms you have to complete regarding your wife. They'll be at the nurse's station."

Noah shut his eyes tight and shook his head as regret washed over him.

"Dr. Michaels," Noah said tearfully.

"Yeah," Dr. Michaels responded, turning back to look at him.

"I'm—I'm sorry for snapping at you. Thank you for the coffee."

Dr. Michaels frowned and then shook his head.

"You don't have to apologize, I understand. I'm so sorry for your loss."

Your loss, your loss, your loss. Noah shut his eyes tight and frowned before breaking into more sobs, realizing that Dr. Michaels' words were a sad reminder of the reason for their meeting, a gentle acknowledgment of Noah's pain. With a wild shake of his head, he desperately tried to kick out the words that had taken root in his mind, but it was futile. They clung to him, etched into the very fabric of his being, and he knew, with a heart-wrenching certainty, that they were there to stay—*forever*.

Instantly, Noah shot his head up and looked all around him as he heard loud chirping from what sounded like crickets, *thousands* of them. He could smell a rancid odor that smelled like burning sulfur, rotting meat, and feces. With each passing second, the chirping grew louder and louder. Noah jumped to his feet as the rancid odor became more pronounced, causing him to cover his nose. Noah darted his eyes around the entire waiting room but saw he was alone. No one nor *anything* was in the room with him—at least in *his* mind, anyway.

Seconds later, Noah dropped to his knees and clutched his chest as a sharp pain stabbed through it. Noah lowered his upper body to the floor as the stabbing pain converted into burning pressure, making his chest feel as if someone or *something* was yanking his heart out with their bare hands. As Noah yelled out in pain, his entire face turned a bright shade of red as he dug his fingers deep into the carpet.

“Give in, Noah!” a male voice whispered in Noah’s ear. “Give in to the pain! Cry! Shout! Give in to it!”

Noah closed his eyes, gasped, and clenched his fist as he felt several electric shocks of searing pain ripple through his chest, making him feel as if he were having a heart attack. Every vein in his face and neck became visible.

“Go within yourself and use one of your IS-BE divine spark abilities, Noah!” another male voice whispered in Noah’s ear. “It’s the only thing that can stop them! Do it! You know *how*! You’ve *always* known how!”

Noah didn’t care at that moment if IS-BE divine spark abilities were witchcraft; he was willing to do anything to stop the physical pain he was feeling. Lifting his right hand, he was about to press his pointer and middle fingers to the center of his forehead when a violent electric shock jolted through his right arm, igniting every nerve with fiery intensity.

He yelled out as tears blurred his vision, not from pain but from

the raw, painful power coursing through him. With a wild shake of his head, he dropped his hand; the echo of the shock still reverberating through his body. His heart raced, pounding against his chest as if trying to break free.

"I can't *do* it!" Noah cried, his voice trembling with desperation. "I'm trying, but I *can't*!"

"Yes, you *can*, Noah!" the male voice urged. "You have to push *through*! Tap into your third IS-BE divine spark abilities! Do it *now* before it's too late!"

With determination, Noah lifted his right hand, feeling the electric shocks coursing through his arm again, igniting a fierce burning sensation that made it feel as if his flesh was on fire. Despite the pain, he firmly pressed his trembling pointer and middle fingers to the center of his forehead. Closing his eyes tightly, he took in a deep, shuddering breath. A vivid world unfurled behind his closed eyelids in that fleeting moment of darkness.

He saw himself walking serenely through a lush, green field—a vibrant tapestry of sunflowers, lilies, and marigolds glowing like little suns beneath the vast, orange dome of the sky. His face, usually a mask of composure, now wore happiness like a second skin, a relaxed, genuine smile that reached the corners of his eyes, crinkling them softly. Meandering to the heart of the field, he lay down on the inviting grass; the earth beneath him embraced his form like a long-lost lover. He closed his eyes as the world around him faded away, and he took another deep breath, drawing in the fragrant air.

In this tranquil refuge, far from the tumult of his daily struggles, he found peace so profound that tears of relief and joy silently coursed down his temples, soaking into the earth as if the land itself shared in his emotional release. Shooting his eyes open, Noah took a loud gasp before dropping over to his side. The chirping had stopped, and all the burning pressure, pain, and electric shock jolts he felt in his body were gone. He

was unaware that Christopher was kneeling beside him, shaking him.

"Noah! Noah, you all right, man?" Christopher shouted.

"I was being attacked, Christopher," Noah said in between heavy, tearful breaths. "By what, I—I don't know—but I felt all of my *energy* and breath being—*sucked* from me just now."

Christopher stared at Noah with a raised brow and nodded while helping him to his feet. Noah held on to Christopher's arm for a few seconds as his legs felt slightly weak and shaky. Christopher unhooked his silver chain with a pyrite stone on it and put it around Noah's neck, resulting in Noah staring at the chain with a frown and a brow raised.

"What's this?"

"It's going to protect you against further attacks," Christopher responded. "They'll still be there, but they won't be able to attack you."

Noah shook his head and squinted at Christopher.

"*They*? Who's they?"

Christopher stared at Noah silently for a few seconds, trying to decide whether to answer him before ultimately shaking his head and looking away from him.

"It's a long story that's not right to tell right now. Just wear it—at *all* times, okay? Anyway, my apologies for getting here late. I had to wait until Halle came home so she could stay with Hazel. How are you holding up?"

Noah sighed, shrugging and slightly shaking his head as he sat in a chair behind him.

"I'm not holding up at all, Christopher. *How* am I going to explain this to Hazel? How do I explain to her—that her mother's *gone*?"

As Noah walked into the house, Hazel by his side, he couldn't help but massage his forehead with his fingers, a deep frown etched his troubled

features. His mind was a tumultuous sea of anxious thoughts, each wave crashing harder than the last, sending his heart into a frantic symphony of beats. The stress painted his face a deep shade of red. His muscles tensely contorted in a vivid display of his inner turmoil.

"Daddy, I thought I was staying with Uncle Christopher and Aunt Halle for the weekend," Hazel said as Noah sat down with her on the living room sofa.

"Um, well, things have changed. I have something to tell you."

"Where's Mommy?"

Instantly, Noah briefly looked away with a frown and closed his eyes as he felt tears stinging them.

"Um, well, today, something happened to Mommy. This evening, Mommy—went away."

"Went away where?"

"To—to heaven, sweetheart, she passed away."

Hazel stared at him in silence for several seconds, making Noah frown with discomfort.

"No, you're lying."

God, how I wish I were lying. I wish this whole evening were just one terrifying lie.

"No, sweetheart, she—"

Noah stopped as Hazel jumped off the sofa, tears clouding her eyes.

"No! No! You're lying! It's not true!"

Before Noah could respond, Hazel ran out of the room and up the stairs.

"Hazel, no! Wait!" Noah shouted as he ran after her but stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

Noah shut his eyes with a frown as the sound of Hazel's bedroom door slamming echoed in his mind. With tears streaming, he climbed the stairs but paused midway and immediately doubled over while clutching

his stomach, feeling a wave of searing pain twist his stomach into knots. Once inside his own room, Noah dropped to the floor beside his bed, resting his weary head against its edge. It wasn't long before the dam broke, and he was overtaken by deep, wrenching sobs that filled the silence.

As he wept, he clutched the comforter tightly, his fingers digging into the fabric as if it could somehow absorb his pain. The intensity of his cries made his face turn bright red, and the veins in his forehead stand out sharply, a testament to the turmoil within. Even as he struggled to breathe through the tears, he found a flicker of strength to bring his hands together in a desperate plea for solace.

"God, *why?*" Noah managed to speak through his sobs. "Please tell me—*show me—why?* What did I do *wrong?* What!"

Noah doubted he could hear the Lord's soft voice through his loud sobbing, but he couldn't help it. The more he tried to calm his sobs, the stronger they gushed out from him like an endless waterfall of mental and emotional pain. At that moment, he was completely unaware that he was being *watched and fed* upon and that his energy was slowly being *filtered* out of him.

In the days that followed, Noah grappled with an overwhelming sense of grief that seemed impossible to contain. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't keep his emotions in check. At Leah's funeral, as Pastor Thomas delivered the final words of closure to the hundreds of mourners, Noah sat beside his daughter, his red, sunken, tearful gaze fixed on the closed, white coffin before him.

He sat still without moving an inch, feeling immobilized and numb to his very core. Everything that defined him as a man seemed to be within that coffin alongside his wife. As he watched the coffin descend into the ground, he gasped and held his breath. He clutched his

chest, feeling his lungs constrict. His throat ignited with an unbearable, searing sensation. The fear of facing the rest of his life without his source of joy, without the woman who had played a pivotal role in his life, enveloped him like an unrelenting blaze.

August stood in line at CVS, the fluorescent lights humming overhead as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Three customers ahead of him. He glanced down at the items in his basket—Tylenol for the headaches that had been plaguing him lately, a notepad, a box of staples, and laundry detergent. Simple enough. The line crawled forward with the particular sluggishness that seemed unique to pharmacy chains. Finally, August stepped up to the counter, setting his items down. The cashier—a kid who couldn't have been more than twenty-four, with shaggy blond hair that fell just above his eyes and tattoos snaking up both forearms—began scanning the items with practiced efficiency. Beep. Beep. Beep. The detergent took two tries before the scanner caught it.

“That'll be twenty-nine dollars,” the cashier said, his voice flat with the exhaustion of someone midway through a double shift.

August raised his brows for a few seconds at the price, but he wasn't exactly shocked. With the government shutdown dragging into its third week and the economy teetering on the edge of full collapse, inflation had turned everyday items into small luxuries. Still, twenty-nine bucks for Tylenol, a notepad, staples, and detergent felt like highway robbery. He reached for his wallet, pulling out two crisp twenties. As he extended them across the counter, the cashier held up a hand.

“Sorry, man. We're not taking cash anymore.”

August's hand froze mid-air, and he raised a brow.

“What? You’re joking, right?”

“No,” the cashier replied, “it’s credit card or digital ID only for now on.”

For a moment, August just stared at him; the twenties still clutched between his fingers.

“Since when?”

The cashier shrugged, already reaching for a plastic CVS bag.

“New policy. Trump put it into place like a week ago. Digital IDs are gonna be mandatory *everywhere* eventually—for payments, identification—everything, all of it will soon be on one digital ID card, which will eventually turn into an RFID chip that’ll be implanted into people.”

August frowned with a brief close of his eyes as he felt something cold settle in his chest. He lowered the cash slowly, tucking it back into his wallet.

“You’re telling me this is at every CVS?” August asked.

“That’s what corporate said in the memo.”

The cashier looked up from bagging the items, his blue eyes narrowing slightly.

“You got your digital ID?” the cashier asked. “Or are you too lazy to get one too?”

As the cashier laughed, August fixed him with a long, level stare—steady, unblinking, the kind that made lesser men clear their throats and search the floor for salvation. It carried more disdain than any shouted curse.

“No,” August said, the word hard as stone.

August could feel his jaw tightening.

“And I never *will* get one,” August added. “I’m not too lazy, I’m too *smart*. I know exactly what evil, satanic bastard is behind this.”

The cashier stopped mid-motion, one tattooed arm still holding the Tylenol above the bag. His eyebrow arched, and his expression

shifted from neutral customer service to something more defensive, almost offended.

“Wait—so you’re not lazy, then—what? Are you one of those Book of Revelation end-times Jesus nuts or one of those uh—conspiracy wackos?”

August met his gaze without blinking. He gave the cashier a thin, patronizing smile that suggested the young man was desperately out of his intellectual depth.

“Definitely not a Jesus nut, nor am I a conspiracy wacko,” August replied. “I’m just someone with a *brain*, you know, those things that existed before corporate memos told everyone how to think.”

As August rolled his eyes, the cashier’s jaw tensed, but he said nothing. He just shoved the bag of items into another bag, but with a little more force than necessary. August pulled out his credit card—for now, that still worked—and swiped it through the reader. The machine beeped its approval.

August took the bag without another word and walked out, the automatic doors sliding open with a soft hiss. The parking lot was half-empty, the evening sun beating down on the asphalt. August slid into the driver’s seat of his car and sat there for a moment, hands gripping the steering wheel, staring through the windshield at nothing in particular.

A digital ID for absolutely everything, a soon to be mandatory digital ID. It was starting. Enki was moving faster than August had anticipated. Exhaling slowly, August’s mind was already turning over the implications. This wasn’t just some bureaucratic power grab or a push for convenience. This was architecture—the foundation for something much *larger*. A system of control so seamlessly integrated into daily life, that by the time people realized what they’d given up, it would be too late.

The old Sumerian texts had warned about this. *Enki*, the

so-called “benefactor” of humanity, the one who'd supposedly given mankind knowledge—he never stopped playing his sinister game. And now, with AI advancing at breakneck speed, with biometric data being normalized, with every transaction and movement tracked and cataloged, the cage was finally taking shape. Permanent *enslavement*. Not with chains, but with *code*.

As the clock approached midnight, August lay in bed, struggling to keep his eyes open while mindlessly flipping through television channels. Despite his efforts, fatigue overwhelmed him, and he found himself yawning every few minutes. He wasn't looking for entertainment. He was looking for an *anchor*. August knew the danger of silence. He was acutely aware that if he stopped on the wrong image—a certain tilt of a woman's head, a specific shade of amber light, or even a line of dialogue about “home”—the mental barriers he'd spent all day, every day reinforcing would simply vanish.

He was terrified of thinking about Samantha. It wasn't just a matter of sadness; it was a matter of survival. To let his mind wander toward her was to pick at a raw, jagged wound that had never truly begun to scab over. He knew that once he allowed that door to crack open, the grief would pour through with a force he couldn't contain, opening an emotional hemorrhage that he feared he would never be able to close again. The thought of her brought a sharp, familiar ache that made his breath hitch.

He shifted restlessly, his thumb hovering over the 'channel up' button. If he let the screen go dark, the room would fill with her. The shadows in the corner would take her shape, and the air would carry the phantom scent of her perfume or the echo of her laugh. As he let out a long, jagged yawn that turned into a low groan of exhaustion. His eyes

were burning, the grit of a long day was making every blink a chore, and rather than use channel-surfing to outrun his thoughts, he decided to turn to the only sanctuary left—the only place where the wound couldn't be reached—*sleep*.

August finally switched off the television. Sitting upright, he reached for his water bottle on the nightstand and quickly drained the last few drops. *Damn, I'm still thirsty*. Rolling his eyes at the thought of having to trek downstairs for a refill, he stared at the empty bottle and weighed his options. Suddenly, to his astonishment, his bottle filled halfway with water. Scared, August yelled while leaping from the bed, tossing the bottle to the floor, and taking several hurried steps back, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"*What the hell?*" August shouted.

August walked back over to the water bottle, but his movements were deliberate and measured. With a furrowed brow and narrowed eyes, he slowly picked up the bottle and scrutinized it intently. To his astonishment, he widened his eyes again and then frowned as the bottle instantly filled with water again, this time to the top. August slowly smiled. He had read tales of such phenomena happening before—stories of individuals discovering latent supernatural abilities that everyone supposedly possessed but were often unaware of how to unlock. Yet, how he had tapped into *this* particular ability eluded him. As he stifled a yawn, a familiar chill coursed through him, a telltale sign that his body was yearning for rest.

Shaking his head, as he walked back over to his bed, he sat down and stared at the bottle for a few seconds with a frown. Hesitantly, he put the bottle to his mouth and guzzled down some of the water. Taking the bottle from his mouth, he frowned with a smirk. The water in his bottle didn't taste like the purified water he was accustomed to but was reminiscent of fresh spring water. Laughing to himself, he placed the bottle on his nightstand table, and after lying down, within minutes, he

was sound asleep. It was a sleep that drifted him straight into a fuzzy visioned dream—



August had a full view of a bathroom in an older man's apartment—the same older man August saw on the beach during his astral projection trip. Inside the bathroom, a younger man dropped to his knees, pulling the older man down with him and keeping him in a tight chokehold. The older man shut his eyes and yelled, feeling aching pressure in his chest and lungs. He could feel bursts of throbbing pain explode in every area of his head.

He hit and scratched at the younger man's arm, trying to get it from around his neck, but it was doing no good, and as the older man shot open his eyes and looked up at the ceiling, there he saw them—the tick-like, parasitical creatures whom he now called *archons*. They were clinging to the corner of the ceiling, *watching* him and the younger man, vibrating, and *feeding* off the negative energy that emanated from the violence taking place in that bathroom.

At that moment, the sight of the archons ignited a primal fury within the older man, resulting in the older man unleashing a guttural roar that echoed through the chaos. With a surge of raw power, the older man hurled the younger man over his shoulder, sending him crashing to the ground a few feet away. As the younger man gasped for breath, the older man lunged forward, mounting him like a beast, and unleashed a flurry of punches aimed at his face.

Each blow was met with desperate blocks, but one punch landed squarely on the younger man's nose, causing a crimson fountain of blood to erupt from him. Grabbing a fistful of the young man's hair, the older man yanked him upright, dragged his head towards the sink and smashed it down with brutal force. The violent sound of impact was followed by a cascade of blood pouring from the young man's head.

Fueled by desperation, the younger man shook off the daze and retaliated by spinning around to tackle the older man.

Both men crashed into the bathroom door mirror, shattering it into a thousand shards that rained down like deadly confetti. Before the older man could react, the younger man unleashed a barrage of punches, each strike landing with severe force, leaving a deep gash splitting the older man's forehead. In a moment of sheer instinct, the older man seized the younger man's head, swung him around, and slammed him into the jagged remnants of the mirror, resulting in blood spraying like a grotesque painting. As the younger man staggered, the older man's hand darted to the floor, snatching a shard of glass, and with savage intent, he plunged it into the younger man's throat repeatedly, painting the scene in a horrific tapestry of blood that splattered across the floor and that drenched the older man in a macabre victory—



With a piercing yell that shattered the silence of the night, August shot up in bed, his face and neck glistening in a cold, clammy sweat. His breath came in heavy, labored gasps as he closed his eyes, attempting to banish the vivid images that had invaded his sleep. August wiped the sweat from his forehead before taking a deep, steadying breath. He held it for a few heartbeats; his chest rising prominently against the dim moonlight filtering through the window before slowly releasing it in a deliberate exhale. He needed to calm the frantic pounding of his heart and soothe the raw nerves frayed by a dream—or, more accurately, a nightmare—that had felt disturbingly *real*.

As August sat in the eerie silence, he found himself massaging his jaw. His face twisted into a frown, marked by perplexity. A groan slipped from him, not only due to the distress caused by the scene he had seen in his dream but also from a lingering ache. It was as if the pain

he had seen the older man endure in his nightmare had somehow become his own.

Every punch, every blow that the older man had endured was etched into August's memory with excruciating clarity, leaving him with a phantom ache that was all too tangible. This marked the second occasion that visions of the older man had troubled August. The first encounter on the beach now seemed like a distant memory compared to the turmoil of the dream he just had. Determined and driven by a newfound resolve, August was intent on unraveling why the older man kept appearing to him. He *needed* to find out why.

CHAPTER FIVE

As dawn broke, August lay motionless in his bed with his eyes shut tight, locked in a web of determination to plunge once more into the depths of astral projection. He couldn't shake the chilling image of the man he had seen being assaulted on the beach from his thoughts. Moments slipped by like shadows as a familiar warmth enveloped him, and a tingling coursed through his veins, heralding the rise of his ethereal form from the confines of his physical shell. With a jolt, he found himself seated on the side of his bed, the room around him cloaked in an unsettling stillness. Frustration bubbled within him as he scanned the familiar surroundings.

How could he possibly reach the tortured soul from the beach when he was adrift in this mundane reality? Suddenly, a spark ignited in his mind, and he envisioned the man's face—his blue eyes glistening with tears, a crimson mask of fear etched upon his features. Suddenly, the environment transformed, pulling him like a magnet into a shadowy dimension where the crimson-streaked stones murmured ancient secrets of Sumerian, Luciferian, and mystical symbols, enticing him to venture further into the darkness.

He experienced the suffocating, searing, dry heat enveloping him while countless men and women chatted around him. Before him lay a sprawling, hilly city, its streets lined with stores, bars, houses, and other structures adorned with Sumerian, Luciferian, and occult symbols. August's eyes widened in horror as he noticed human remains—*flesh*, body parts, and organs—littering the ground amidst the debris. Encircling the city was a tall, dense green net punctuated by numerous

small holes, through which electricity surged every five seconds. Above this unsettling scene, a multitude of large, bright stars twinkled in the pitch-black sky, casting a dim glow over the land. The thumping, resonant beats of occult music erupted from a bar several blocks away, creating an eerie atmosphere.

Just ahead, in a narrow alley just a few feet away, he caught sight of something that drew his attention. He stumbled upon a gruesome spectacle, six pit bulls locked in a savage, blood-soaked brawl, their snarls echoing like the cries of the damned. Gasping, August's breath caught in his throat as he witnessed one of the beasts tear the head clean off another, a fountain of blood erupting in a grotesque display. August clutched his stomach, feeling it twist painfully, a sharp, burning agony piercing through him as he realized he had wandered into a nightmarish realm, perhaps a horrifying level of the astral plane. He exhaled shakily and wrapped his arms around himself, feeling the oppressive weight of a malevolent presence pressing down on him like a vice.

Grimacing and grabbing his throat while clearing it, he felt the sinister force constricting him, suffocating his very essence. Just as the darkness began to recede, a new sensation crept in, a lighter and *friendlier* one. When he turned around, his eyes widened, and his heart raced at the sight before him. It was the man from his beach astral projection vision, yet he appeared altered, a shadow of his former self. The man's face bore the marks of suffering, etched with deep lines, his blue baseball cap was stained ominously with blood. Scratches and bruises marred his lower jaw and neck, and a deep gash on his forehead visibly represented violence. Exhaling a shuddering breath, August felt a chill run down his spine.

"You," August said in a low tone, "you're the guy I saw on the beach and in my dream."

"Yeah, I am," the man replied in a slightly hoarse voice while

nodding and smiling briefly, "I don't know how I knew you were here and where you *were* here, but somehow—I just knew. So, here I am."

"Where am I?" August asked while looking up and around him.

"Where are *we*?"

With his brows furrowing, the man looked all around him.

"The Summerland," the man replied in a low, whispering, gloomy tone. "It's a prison realm for souls."

The Summerland was a realm August had never heard of, but it was one of which he made a mental note to study up on later upon coming out of astral projection.

"I'm August Cameron," August said, extending his hand for the man to shake.

"Good to meet you, August," the man said while shaking August's hand. "I'm Jack Hunter."

August nodded.

"Well, Jack, are—you all right?" August asked with a brow raised. "I mean—with the bruises and the blood on your clothes, you look—well—you look kind of horrible."

Jack looked away for a few seconds with a brief smirk and a shake of his head.

"Yesterday was energy harvesting day here in The Summerland, August," Jack said in a low voice, "and so, last night, some guys broke into the place where I live to—try to kill me—if that even makes sense considering the fact of where I am. So, I had to defend myself. They lost and I won."

August gaped as his eyes widened.

"So it *did* happen to you!" August asked.

Jack raised a brow, and slightly tilted his head.

"Excuse me?"

"Last night, I had a dream about you," August said, "you were in this *brutal* fight with a guy in your apartment, and you stabbed him in

the throat and—”

“Decapitated another guy with a hatchet,” Jack cut in with a serious expression and a nod, “yeah, that was me. I did what I had to do. It was either their—*lives* or mine. I don’t know why you dreamed of it though.”

Jack shrugged.

“Anyway, so—that’s where the blood and bruises come from,” Jack said, smiling before looking down, sighing, and shaking his head as his smile faded, “but I get the feeling you’re not here to talk to me about that. You’re here because you saw me on the beach, being attacked by Enki’s—*monsters*.”

August nodded with a frown.

“Right,” August replied, “Look, why—”

“I don’t *know* how you were able to see me on that beach,” Jack interjected. “I mean, I don’t ever remember meeting you when I was alive—but it doesn’t even matter. I’m just—glad you’re here because—I need your *help*, August.”

In the days after Leah’s funeral, Noah’s grief deepened, each night was marked by tears as he watched old videos of Leah, Hazel, and himself—laughing on the beach and enjoying playful moments while cooking in the kitchen. Memories, now unreachable, haunted him, reinforcing a future without Leah. In the quiet of stormy nights, when memories became his only company, Noah lay in bed, engulfed in grief, his loud sobs a haunting echo of loss.

His daughter stood just outside his door, her teddy bear squeezed tight to her heart-pounding chest as her face constricted into a sad frown. She pouted, and tears streamed down her face as she silently connected with her father’s profound sadness before quietly

retreating to mourn alone in her own room.

As days turned into weeks, Noah seemed to find the most comfort in the church. For Noah, Sundays couldn't come quickly enough. Sitting in church with his daughter and hundreds of other parishioners while listening to Pastor Thomas' sermons about maintaining hope and faith, even amid tragedy, was an intense form of therapy for Noah. Each service seemed to help him feel that church was the absolute healing he needed. It was the answer to his emotional pain and grief. It gave him the strength and energy he longed for to try to reclaim his life back. The first step in reclaiming his life came on a Monday morning, as he sat in his car in front of Hazel's Cardinal Elementary School with Hazel in the front passenger seat.

"Sweetie, you sure you want to go back to school?"

"Yeah, it's what Mommy would want."

Noah smiled and kissed her on the forehead.

"Okay, well, I'll be back here to pick you up at three, okay? I love you."

"I love you too, Daddy," Hazel replied before hugging and kissing him on the cheek.

It was five minutes to eight when Noah walked into Takoma Montessori. The first face he saw was Eve Cunningham, the childcare center's receptionist. As he did every morning, Noah walked up to the desk and greeted her with a warm smile.

"Morning, Eve."

Eve, displaying a frown before averting her gaze away from him, wiped Noah's smile off his face.

"Noah, um—Lilith wants to see you."

"Is there anything wrong?"

God, I hope nothing is wrong, not this morning.

Eve shrugged while avoiding eye contact, making Noah even more uneasy.

“Uh, I don’t know. You have to find out from her.”

Instantly, Noah bit down hard on the inside of his lower lip and wrinkled his brow. He groaned as his stomach twisted in knots. He closed his eyes and forced himself to think positive thoughts. He took a deep inhale of breath and then a slow exhale out. He forced himself to believe that God would not allow him to get any more bad news than he had already received. The passing seconds felt like minutes as he walked down the hallway towards the director’s office.

Stopping in front of the red, closed door to the office, he gasped a bit with a brief close of his eyes, feeling his heart leap up into his throat. Noah cleared his throat while touching his neck. He said a quick mental prayer, pleading to God that it was nothing serious that Lilith wanted to discuss with him. Noah opened the door to the office and walked in. He saw Lilith, a full-figured, middle-aged redhead, sitting behind a desk, typing away on a computer.

“Lilith, Eve told me you wanted to see me.”

Lilith glanced up at him and flashed a brief smile before nodding.

“Yeah, have a seat, Noah.”

Noah walked over and sat in the chair in front of Lilith’s desk.

“So, how are you holding up? I know Lisa’s death must have been hard on you.”

“It was *Leah*, and yeah, it was tough. I still haven’t wrapped my head around the fact that she’s gone.”

“Yeah, that’s why the news I’m about to give you now—Noah, I’m sorry.”

“What news?”

“Well, I’ve decided to let go of six teachers here. Due to all that’s going on with this economy right now, we have to downsize due to the

government shutdown, and unfortunately, you're one of the six I'm letting go of."

Instantly, Noah's eyes widened. He felt the knots in his stomach twist tighter, so tight that he gripped the wooden arm of the chair he was in with his left hand. Feeling lightheaded and nauseous, he briefly held his forehead with his right hand. His chest burned as if it were on fire. After a few seconds, he dropped his hand from his forehead and shook his head with an upset frown.

"You're letting me go?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry, Noah."

"Why? I mean—why me? What did I do wrong? I've been a great teacher here—"

"Noah, I know—"

"And you just told me last week how impressed you were by my work—"

"Noah, I *know*, but we're not doing so well right now. Thanks to this shutdown, a lot of businesses aren't doing so well across the states right now, so we have to downsize. It sucks, I know, but it has to be done."

"So, you're firing *me*? Lilith, please don't do this, *please*. I *need* this job, especially now."

"Aww, I know, but you'll bounce back, Noah. I mean, you're a damn good teacher, so you'll find another job—"

"Yeah, or maybe I *won't*. It's *hard* to find another job these days. The job market is literally *dead*."

"Noah, I know, but I—"

"I mean, people *everywhere* are losing their jobs now without even being able to find another one. Everything is a mess, thanks to Trump and those idiots in Washington. Everyone's suffering through gas price hikes and food shortages—I mean—what am I supposed to *do*? Please, I'm *begging* you, *please* let me keep my job—"

“Noah! Look, I’m sorry! I wish I could change the circumstances, but I just—I *can’t*. I’m sorry.”

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, those were the words echoing in Noah’s head as he walked into the living room of his home. After throwing the card box containing all of his work belongings onto a nearby recliner chair, he turned, walked out, and entered the hallway bathroom. He sought refuge in the cold splash of water against his skin. However, it offered no relief to the turmoil inside.

The man in the mirror, with his lean, angular face, light brown hair falling across his forehead, and green eyes bright with tears, bore the weight of worlds unseen. He sat on the floor and closed his eyes before uttering a plea that barely escaped from him—it was a prayer for guidance and for strength in the face of overwhelming loss.

“God, please talk to me,” Noah whispered, his tearful voice a mix of desperation and hope.

Immediately, he heard loud chirping all around him. The chirping sounded like hundreds of loud crickets. Opening his eyes, he looked up at the ceiling above him and jumped to his feet while yelling. His eyes widened at the frightening sight in front of him. Clinging to the ceiling was an enormous, long, black, and bony tick-like creature with large, slanted, solid black eyes and an enormous head.

The creature had a long scorpion-like tail and a long, slit mouth that was open, revealing its long, protruding, white, razor-sharp teeth that had large amounts of thick, slimy blood oozing down from them. Long, black, razor-sharp claws were on the ends of the creature’s hands. With its head back, the creature let out a loud, disembodied wail as its body vibrated. Was he really seeing what he thought he was? No, *I must be hallucinating from tiredness; I have to be*. Noah shut his eyes tight with

a frown. No, *you're just seeing things. Get a grip, Noah, get a grip!* Noah took several big breaths and held them for two seconds before exhaling. The frown of fear on his face disappeared after his seventh exhale. He had gotten himself calm, and within an instant, he heard silence in the room. He shot open his eyes. The creature was gone. Noah sighed with relief, closing his eyes again for a few seconds. Pinching his eyes with his fingers, he yawned.

Noah knew he needed sleep. He didn't get much of it the night before, so that had to be why he saw the hideous creature at that moment—Noah hoped anyway. The sound of his doorbell made Noah jump. As he walked to the door, he said a silent, mental prayer, begging God not to let it be more bad news on his doorstep. Opening his door, Noah pursed his lips and frowned as he saw August standing on his doorstep.

"You again?" Noah asked in a sharp, cold tone. "What do you want?"

"Look," August replied, "I know you hoped to never see me again because I—"

"You're right, I *did*!" Noah cut in before swinging the door closed. August slid his foot in front of the door, preventing it from closing on him, and sighed.

"Noah, *wait*—"

Noah squinted and shook his head.

"How do you know my name?"

"Your father told me, and then I looked up your name and information online, and when I saw this address—"

Noah raised his brows at him.

"My *father*?" Noah interrupted. "You knew my father? How? You look like you're around my age—well, maybe a few years younger, but then maybe did—"

"I know him *now*," August cut in, "I—"

“Know him *now*?” Noah yelled, his nostrils flaring. “Okay, stop! My father is *dead*! He died decades ago, so now I *know* you’re lying! Get your *foot* out of my doorway and get *off* my doorstep before I call the cops!”

“Damn it, Noah, *wait*!” August said while pushing the door back that Noah was trying to push closed. “I’m not lying! Yes, I know he’s dead—*physically*, but he’s still *alive*; his soul is still *alive* in the afterlife. He’s an IS-BE in an afterlife realm called The Summerland, and he wanted me to talk to you and give you a message, so he asked for my help.”

Noah laughed with a shake of his head. Never had he heard such foolishness before in his life. Nowhere in the Bible had he read of a place called The Summerland.

“Wait—The *Summerland*? Really?” Noah replied with a brow raised, “And what is he doing there? Huh?”

“Well,” August replied, “he—”

“Is he eating cheese and crackers with the queen?” Noah cut in with a British accent. “Look, I’m closing the door now, and this is the *last* time I’m going to tell you. Get *off* my doorstep and *leave* my property before I *drop* my religion for ten minutes and *make* you leave!”

August frowned with a brief smirk before looking away, shaking his head and laughing. August had a black belt in martial arts, so Noah’s threat of violence was beyond amusing in August’s mind.

“Yeah, *okay*—look,” August said, “Noah—”

Before August could say anything else, Noah slammed the door shut on him. Walking away from the door, Noah paced back and forth in the hallway. His hands felt hot as he rubbed them down his reddened face. His breaths were heavy, and his blood was boiling. The nerve of August coming to his home with even more ridiculousness than he had spewed before was almost unbelievable to Noah.

Briefly shaking his hands wildly, Noah frowned with a shake of

his head. The thought of August knowing Noah's name crept Noah out. Noah was sure that August had to be some crazed loon who was obsessed with trying to change, perhaps the one person who had turned his anti-Christian beliefs down.

"Noah, listen!" August shouted from the other side of Noah's door. "You *have* to listen to me! Jack *asked* me to come talk to you!"

Noah's eyes widened at the hearing of his father's name. *How did he know my father's name?* Shaking his head again, Noah decided to dismiss that factor as being more of a clear sign that August was some deranged nut who, no doubt, looked up everything he could online about Noah, including who his father was. Noah sighed while shutting his eyes with a frown.

As his face turned red, he felt heat rush throughout his body. He had the strong urge to rush back to the door, open it, and punch August in his face repeatedly until his fists got tired, but then he thought—*what would Jesus do?* Noah turned around, walked back to the door, opened it, and stared at August with a raised brow.

"Noah, look, I know I *sound* crazy," August said, "but I—"

"August," Noah cut in while rolling his eyes at him, "I could seriously beat you to a pulp right here and now, but I *won't*—"

August stared at him with a brow raised.

"No, I *know* you won't because I wouldn't even *let* you get the chance," August interjected. "Your threats don't scare me, Noah. I'm trained in martial arts; I box and so I know exactly how to fight and defend myself. Now—"

Noah's nostrils flared, and his jaw clenched.

"I know how to defend myself *too*!" Noah cut in, "you son of a—"

Noah stopped, lowered his head, closed his eyes, and exhaled as August raised his brows and smiled.

"Oh, look at there, careful, what you're about to say isn't *Christian*," August joked in a singing tone before laughing.

Noah gripped his door so hard he could feel a pressuring pain pulsate through his fingers.

“Look, August, I will say this *one last time* because I *know* God. Get off my property now, or I promise, instead of throwing hands with you right on my front lawn and risk getting arrested, I’ll call the police and have you arrested for *trespassing!*”

August’s smile faded, and he exhaled roughly before looking away and shaking his head.

“Noah, look, all joking aside, I’m telling you the *truth*,” August said, “I—”

“Okay, you obviously think I’m joking. The cops will be here in five minutes, maybe less than that if I’m *lucky!*” Noah said before slamming the door shut.

“Noah? Noah!” August shouted. “*Damn it.*”

August rolled his eyes while shaking his head and walking away to his car. August knew from his first time meeting Noah that it would be hard to have any type of conversation with him; however, he didn’t realize it would be *that* much of a challenge. However, he’d have to find some way to get Noah to believe him, for Jack’s sake.

Later in the evening, as Noah leaned up against the railing of his backyard deck, he remained quiet and observant while listening to Christopher quibble with Jacob, his friend from church.

“Anyway, *whatever*,” Christopher said while rolling his eyes at Jacob, “look, that’s bullshit, Noah, okay? You were the *best* teacher that childcare center had.”

“Really, Christopher? There you go again with the swearing,” Jacob snapped.

“Apologies, *John the Baptist*,” Christopher joked, “All right? You

happy now that I've apologized?"

"Yeah, you *should* use the word sorry since that's what you are anyway," Jacob insulted.

"Anyway, you two," Noah said before sighing and shaking his head. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I got a shut-off notice from Dominion Energy, giving me until Friday to pay the electric bill, but if I don't have the money today, I'm not going to have it Friday either."

"Damn, man," Christopher said before shaking his head.

"Hey!" Jacob snapped with anger.

"Look!" Christopher snapped back. "Last time I checked, I wasn't six, so I can say what I *want*!"

"Not when you're around two Christians, you can't!" Jacob shouted.

"Guys!" Noah yelled. "Can you two *quit* it already? Anyway, the rent is also way past due, and come this Saturday, I'll be owing for two months."

"What happened to the savings you had in the bank?" Christopher asked.

"I—spent that money on Leah's funeral. All of this is just—*piling* up on me. I just—I just don't *know* what I'm going to do. I guess I just have to—wait on the Lord."

"Good," Jacob said with a nod, "that's what you *should* do."

"No, that is *not* what you should do, Noah," Christopher said. "Wait on the Lord? Bruh, you're crazy, you know that, right? You're talking about the same lord who took away your wife—"

"That wasn't God, Chris," Noah replied, "God doesn't kill people. *Satan* does."

"Oh, that's bullshit!" Christopher snapped.

As Jacob shot an angry glare over at Christopher, Christopher stared back at Jacob with a brow raised.

"Yeah, I said *bullshit*, Jacob, because it is!"

"It is not, Chris, all right?" Noah shouted. "It says in John 10:10 that Satan comes to steal, kill, and destroy. God doesn't do that, not my God anyway."

"Oh, and so your God doesn't have any power to stop the supposedly separate character named Satan or Lucifer from taking people's lives then?" Christopher snapped. "Or maybe it's just that he doesn't *care*."

"God sends people through *testings*, Christopher," Jacob said.

"Oh, here we go with this shit again," Christopher replied in a low voice with a shake of his head.

"Chris, Jacob's right," Noah chimed in, "God took his protection from around Job so that Satan could test his faith and see if Job would *remain* loyal, and despite Job losing everything, he *still* kept his faith and trust in God and with him doing so, God delivered him from all his troubles."

"Uh-huh," Christopher said with a contrived look of understanding, "and so—God tested your faith by *allowing* Satan to kill your wife, yet you still want to have faith and trust in a God like that?"

While pacing, Noah crossed his arms and pursed his lips, trying his best to quell the anger rising within him. Christopher was starting to get on his nerves.

"I mean, I'm telling you, Noah," Christopher continued, "one day you're going to find out just how much your supposed *good* God loves you, and when you do, it's going to devastate you to absolutely *no* end, and then—"

"Christopher, stop!" Noah shouted in anger. "Look, we know what you're trying to do, all right? I've *told* you *several* times before, you're not *getting* me to turn away from God! What happened with my family was all *Satan*! Now, I don't know why all this is happening to me, but if Satan thinks for *one* moment that because he did all this, I'm going to turn away from God, he's *wrong*! I *know* that God will see me through this and

work this situation out for Hazel and me, and I—I don't even want to *talk* to you when you're talking negatively like this! Get off my deck *now*!"

Noah turned and stormed inside the house before either Christopher or Jacob could say another word, slamming the door behind him.

"Well, I guess he told you," Jacob said with a smirk. "You *should* leave and go back to the *ghetto* where you belong. Noah doesn't *want* you here—boy. He has his real friend—*me*."

"Ha, ha, no, miss me with that, all right?" Christopher replied. "Ask him who he considers to be his *best* friend—*me*, the one who's *been* his friend *and* brother from another mother since *fourth* grade. *You*, he just met a year ago when you joined his 'honk if you love Jesus,' bullshit ass church. And you're lucky I don't *lay* you out right here on Noah's deck, talking about 'ghetto' and calling me 'boy'. Don't let your mouth write a check your ass can't *cash*."

Jacob rolled his eyes as Christopher walked down the steps of the deck.

Noah paced back and forth in his kitchen while biting down on his lower lip. As he broke into a sweat on his forehead, his insides felt like an inferno. He clenched his fists with heavy breaths as tears clouded his eyes. As his brows furrowed, he could feel his adrenaline pumping and his heart racing—all because of *fear*, fear that perhaps—Christopher was right. *Could Christopher be right? Could it be that God—Jesus was the one who caused all that I'm going through?*

Noah shook his head as he dropped down in a chair at the table. No, he wouldn't think like that. He *couldn't* think like that. He *had* to continue to keep his faith and trust in Jesus, his Lord and Savior, because in Noah's mind, Jesus was the only person who could see him through.

"Noah, I apologize, all right?" Christopher said as he walked into

the kitchen from the hallway.

Noah looked up at Christopher and then rolled his eyes while wiping streaming tears away.

"You know how I feel about God, Christopher, and it pisses me off to no end that after *all* these years, you're *still* trying to pull me *away* from him. I'm getting *really* sick of it. You of all people should know that I'm *not* giving God up, not for *anything* or *anyone*."

Christopher sighed as he dropped down in a chair in front of Noah.

"I know, Noah. I guess it just takes you learning the hard way—"

"Learning *what* the hard way?" Noah shouted.

Christopher shook his head with a brief amused smile while waving his hand at Noah.

"Never mind I said that; forget it. Look, have you thought of calling any agencies for help with your bills, especially your rent?"

Noah sighed and shook his head with a shrug.

"Yeah, I did, and most of them are depleted of funds, probably because of the government shutdown."

"Well, what about unemployment benefits?"

"I wasn't working at the center long enough for that. I'd only been there for less than a month, so I wouldn't qualify and even if I did, I probably wouldn't get them because—*again*—"

"The shutdown, I know. Damn," Christopher said before sighing and biting down hard on his lower lip.

"You know," Noah began, "I've never told anyone this before, not Jacob or anyone at church, not even Leah, but—sometimes I feel this intense—*emptiness*, and no matter what I do, I can't find anything to fill it, you know? I mean—and when I say this, *don't* take this as a win for you because I'm *not* leaving Christianity—but if I'm being honest, I've—I've just been finding that not even Christianity or God feels the void. It's just weird because I just feel like *nothing* really fits in my life at *all*."

"I know the feeling," Christopher replied. "I've felt that way myself."

"Yeah," Noah continued, "I just—for a while now I've been feeling like there's something inside of me that *should* be full, but—it's not; it's *missing*. I don't know; I just sometimes feel like—I *really* don't even *belong* down here in this world at all. I feel like I'm always searching for some realm of ultimate bliss, peace, and happiness, but no matter *where* I go down here, I just *can't find* it."

Christopher's brows furrowed as he shook his head and sighed in frustration. He found himself torn between providing Noah with the only answer he was sure of—the *correct* one—or giving him a fabricated response to sidestep a potential conflict.

"Well, all I can say to you is this, Noah," Christopher said, "there *are* answers to what you're feeling, and—when you're ready to accept them, hopefully you will."

Noah raised a brow with a slight head tilt and a frown.

"What *exactly* do you mean by that, Chris?" Noah responded with an icy tone.

Christopher rolled his eyes and sighed while looking away from Noah and shaking his head.

"Noah, I really don't want to argue with you over this, all right? Look—let's change subjects."

As Noah shook his head, Christopher pulled out his cell phone and typed on it.

"What's your username and password for Xfinity?" Christopher asked.

"NoahH2012, and my password is Senoia, why?"

Christopher held up his right hand, motioning for Noah to wait while typing on his phone with his left hand. After several seconds, Christopher turned his phone off and tucked it into his shirt pocket.

"Okay, I just paid your cable and internet bill, so at least you have

that—”

“What!” Noah exclaimed. “Chris, oh—no, you—you didn’t have to do that—”

“No, I know, but I *wanted* to. You and Hazel can’t be in this house all night without cable and internet, and don’t tell me that you two aren’t because I checked and I know that you both are. Tomorrow, I can give you five thousand, which should take care of your rent and bills at least until you get back on your feet—”

“What?” Noah asked with wide eyes. “Chris, no, are you *crazy*? No, look, no, I—I couldn’t let you do that, I *won’t*—”

“Noah, you’re not *letting* me do anything. I’m doing it because you’re my brother from another mother. Hell, scratch that; you’re my *brother, period*, and I’m not going to let you and Hazel suffer like this, no.”

Noah stared at Christopher with an emotional frown; his green eyes softened at Christopher’s statement, and he could feel tears welling up in them. At that moment, he wasn’t sure how he had become so lucky and blessed to have a friend like Christopher.

“Chris—you’d actually *do* that?” Noah asked tearfully. “I mean, I—I don’t know when I’d even be able to pay you back—”

“You pay me back when you *can*. That’s not what’s important right now, though. What’s important is you getting back on your feet.”

Noah looked away as tears streamed from his eyes. Biting down on his lower lip for a few seconds, it took everything within him at that moment not to break down.

“Chris, thank you. Seriously, thank you so much, thank you—”

“Hey, stop with the profuse gratitude. You don’t have to thank me, but you know, I just thought about something. Noah, you remember how much you like entering writing contests?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“And you know you have a degree in writing, right?”

"Of course. What *about it*?" Noah asked impatiently.

"Well, how about you trying to get a job in that? I mean, that could be really rewarding since writing is something you enjoy doing anyway, and you've always been *damn* good at it—maybe you could get a job at The Richmond Times-Dispatch. I mean it may be worth a shot to at least try."

Noah nodded with a brief smile. Writing was a career that Noah hadn't even thought about embarking on professionally, but just in the few seconds of Christopher mentioning it, Noah instantly remembered the joy he felt when he poured out the imagined, creative stories he had in his head onto paper.

"You may have a point there," Noah said. "Yeah, I'll look around online and see what I can find tonight."

"Good," Christopher said, smiling while standing up. "Well, okay, I gotta go, but I'll be over tomorrow evening after work to give you the money. Until then, just—try to get some rest and quit worrying. Everything's going to be okay now, I promise."

Staring at Christopher with a frown and with his eyes softening at Christopher's display of concern, Noah stood up and hugged Christopher.

"Thank you, Chris, seriously. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you as a brother."

"You sure you don't mean to give that remark to Jacob?" Christopher asked. "Because he seems to think that you consider him a closer friend than me."

Noah frowned with a brow raised.

"What? No, look, Jacob is my friend, but you're my *best* friend, *and* you're my brother; you're *family*, and that won't ever change, no matter how much you piss me off sometimes."

Christopher and Noah laughed.

"Thanks, that means a lot."

“Thank you for helping me,” Noah said.

Christopher smiled.

“Hey, don’t mention it; like you just said, we’re family, and family helps family. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

Noah nodded as he watched Christopher walk out of the kitchen. Taking in a deep breath, Noah exhaled with a brief close of his eyes and a smile. He felt a cool, relaxing sensation wash over him, and in his mind, that sensation came down from God, and in turn, God filtered it through to Christopher. *Things are going to be okay; God will make sure of it. Chris said it, and I believe it.*

While driving down West Broad Street in Richmond, Christopher glanced down at the clock and sucked his teeth with a shake of his head.

“Damn,” Christopher said before sighing and pressing a button on his steering wheel.

Within seconds, a ringing was heard, and then a male voice answered—it was his co-worker, Max.

“Hey, where are you?” Max asked. “You were supposed to be here an hour ago. You know we have to finish this presentation tonight for tomorrow.”

“I know, I know,” Christopher replied, “I apologize; I had to deal with something with my brother first, but I’m on my way to the office now.”

“Great, because if we lose this account, Priscilla will have me sleeping on the sofa for weeks.”

Christopher laughed.

“See, that’s why marrying your boss is never good,” Christopher joked as Max laughed.

“Yeah, whatever, just get here,” Max said.

“I’ll be there in thirty,” Christopher replied.

After pressing a button on his steering wheel again, Christopher squinted his eyes with a frown as he glanced up in his rearview mirror and saw a bald man with large, glowing, solid, white eyes and a pale white, oblong face with numerous, slender streaks of smoke slithering up and down it. The man's teeth were red, rotten, and had blood streaming from them. Immediately, Christopher could smell the nauseating scent of burning sulfur.

As the man flashed a huge, evil grin, Christopher's eyes widened, his mouth dropped open, and his heart pounded faster. The skin on his arms became cold as he broke into a heavy sweat on his forehead within seconds. As several streaks of lightning flashed in front of the man's face, Christopher's breath got caught up in his throat.

"What the hell?" Christopher said in a low voice. "What—"

Christopher stopped when he heard a loud horn blowing to his right. Christopher shot his eyes to his right, raising his brows as his car suddenly stopped in the middle of the street. Approaching at a fast speed of seventy miles per hour was a big 2022 GMC Canyon Elevation pickup truck.

"Oh *no*!" Christopher exclaimed in a low voice.

With force, Christopher repeatedly slammed his foot down on the gas pedal to try to drive the car out of the way of the speeding truck, but for some reason, despite the engine still being on and his car being in drive, the car wouldn't move, not even an inch.

"Come on! Come on, *goddamn* it!" Christopher yelled while continuously pressing his foot down on the gas.

Christopher stopped, looked up, and looked into the rearview mirror as he heard the pale, oblong-faced man let out a loud, echoing, vibrating, demonic laugh. It was at that moment that Christopher knew exactly who that pale, oblong-faced man was.

"No," Christopher said with tearful eyes and a shake of his head, "no—"

Before Christopher could finish, the truck slammed hard into Christopher's two-door Chevrolet Spark, resulting in Christopher's car flipping over several times and eventually crashing into a nearby Wells Fargo Bank. With him and his car upside down, Christopher coughed with severity, and blood dripped down his face, seeping into his eyes. He felt sharp, stabbing, piercing pain in every part of his body. His lungs burned like fire with every breath that he took. His legs felt icy cold, numb, and paralyzed. He reached over to his seatbelt, and as he clicked it open, his body collapsed out of the seat, resulting in him yelling and then coughing up thick blood from his mouth.

A sudden, burning sensation shot through the center of his back, causing his eyes to widen as a cry of agony escaped from him. Darting his eyes over to his right, he saw numerous, long, bony, black, slimy, tick-like creatures kneeling and peering into the broken open window of his front passenger side door. They had big, solid, black eyes and gigantic mouths that were open to reveal their long, protruding, white, sharp teeth shaped like horns.

"No," Christopher said tearfully with a shake of his head, "no, no, no, no, no!"

As the creatures let out loud, vibrating wails, Christopher hollered and struggled with wildness to get out of the car but then coughed up thicker amounts of blood.

"Get me out of here!" Christopher shouted tearfully. "Get me out! Get me out of here! *Someone!* Please get me out of here! They're trying to take me! Get me out! Get—"

Christopher stopped and widened his eyes again as he gasped loudly. Clenching his fists, he frowned, trying to calm his breathing but couldn't as he broke into loud, repeated gasps. As the wailing from the creatures grew louder, Christopher stopped gasping, his eyes rolled back, and he went into convulsions for several seconds before he closed his eyes and died. After several seconds, Christopher let out a loud gasp

and shot his eyes open. Looking around the upside-down car he was still in, he frowned as his body felt lighter than a feather. Every ache and pain in his body was gone. *How? I just got hit by a huge truck. Why don't I feel any more pain? What happened to my pain?*

"Looks like you need help, friend," Christopher heard a male voice say to the right of him.

Turning to his right, Christopher noticed a man with an eerily pale complexion. His straight, long hair, white as snow, was tied with shimmering golden bands at the ends. The man's eyes emitted an unusual blue glow, enhancing the peculiar aura about him. He was dressed in a white V-neck hoodie, complete with drawstrings, and paired with white scrub pants. As he bent down beside Christopher's car, he flashed a smile and extended his hand to Christopher.

"It sure looks like you need help," the man said with an eerie smile. "Come on, my name is Odin. The universe is waiting for you."

Christopher frowned.

"The universe?"

"Yeah," Odin replied, "the *land* of the—*free* universe, it's waiting for you."

"Are you—are you *Jesus*?" Christopher asked in a slightly higher-pitched tone.

Odin let out a hearty laugh.

"Now, now, Zachary, you and I both know that you don't believe in Jesus or Christianity, so why would I show up as—*Jesus*? No, I'm a servant of the *father*—"

"God?" Christopher asked with widened eyes, "no, no way, he doesn't—"

"Exist?" Odin cut in. "Exactly, well, not in the way the Bible speaks of anyway. Never mind; we can talk about that later. Right now, though, the free universe is waiting for you, so come on. We have to leave before—*Enki* and his archons show up, trying to take you through

that trapping white light.”

“White light?” Christopher asked tearfully. “So, I *am* dead?”

Odin displayed a contrived, saddened face with pouting lips and clenched brows.

“I’m sorry, you are,” Odin replied in almost a sing-songy tone.

“No!” Christopher shouted tearfully. “No! Damn it, I *can’t* die now! What about—*damn* it, what about Noah and Hazel? They *need* me, I was supposed to—”

“Hey, hey, hey, relax. They’ll still have you,” Odin said with a contrived smile, “but just from somewhere else, so don’t be sad, Christopher. Where you’re going will be a *whole* different atmosphere than this world. I promise it’ll be—like *nothing* you’ve *ever* seen!”

Christopher wasn’t sure whether he should go with Odin or not. After all, he had heard about the theory of the white light after death trick, the *reincarnation* trick. However, Christopher didn’t see a white light near Odin or him, signifying that he *was* being presented with the trick to reincarnate.

Also, Odin mentioned going to the free universe, and Christopher *thought* he knew enough to know that the free universe existed *outside* the matrix prison planet of Earth and all its other prison planet realms. Slowly reaching out his hand, Christopher took hold of Odin’s hand, and as Odin grabbed it and displayed an eerie smile, both Christopher and Odin vanished into thin air.

CHAPTER SIX

As Noah sat at his desk that night, the storm outside raged; rain lashed against his bedroom window like a relentless drum. While immersing himself in the pages of the Bible, pouring over Psalms, Proverbs, and Job—his heart *ached* for clarity, for a sign that God was still by his side. Each verse felt like a lifeline, and he desperately sought the one that would reassure him in his turmoil. After reading Psalm 37, he closed his eyes, intertwined his fingers, and silenced the chaos around him, yearning to hear the gentle whisper of God's presence.

He understood that divine communication with God was rarely thunderous; it was often a quiet murmur, requiring a Christian to still their thoughts and simply—*listen*. Noah sat in silence for twenty long minutes, but all he encountered was an overwhelming void. The stillness was deafening. As he tightened his grip and furrowed his brow, frustration bubbled within him; his face flushed red with a hardened effort to clear his mind. A groan escaped from him as a wave of pressure surged through his head. His heart *ached* with longing for a word from his heavenly father, yet the silence persisted, heavy and unyielding.

“Daddy! Daddy!” Hazel’s voice burst into the room, shattering the fragile moment of solitude.

Noah gasped, jolted from his reverie by her exuberance. He sighed, rolling his eyes as he turned to face her. It wasn’t that he was irritated by her presence; it was just that he wished she hadn’t come in at that precise moment when he was reaching out to the one force that he believed could deliver them through their struggles. He *craved* that connection, free from distractions.

“What’s wrong, honey?” he asked, rising to his feet and crossing the room to scoop her up in his arms.

“It’s thundering outside. Usually, I’d hide in my closet when it’s thundering, but I don’t want to tonight. So, can I sleep in here with you, Daddy? I’m scared.”

“Aww, sure, sweetheart, but remember what I told you: thunder comes from God, and it can’t—”

“Hurt you,” Hazel chimed in.

“Exactly,” Noah replied before putting her in his bed.

“Daddy, why did God take Mommy?”

Noah sighed as he sat down on the bed in front of her.

“God didn’t take her away, honey. Satan did. He did it to try to get us to hate God, but we can’t do that. No matter how much we’re hurting, we can’t.”

“Is that why you cry almost every night? Because you’re hurting?” Hazel asked.

“How do you know I cry almost every night?”

“For several nights, I couldn’t sleep, so I came to your door, and I heard you crying.” Hazel responded.

Noah closed his eyes, frowned, briefly covered his face, and sighed. *Crap*. He thought he was doing well in hiding his grief from his daughter, but apparently, he wasn’t.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s because I’m hurting, and I miss her. I miss her so much.”

Noah turned his gaze away; his throat tightened as he fought back the tears that threatened to spill over. The ache of missing his wife was a heavy weight in his chest, a reminder of the love that was now just a memory. He sighed with a frown, determined to hold it together, especially with his daughter lying so vulnerably before him. The last thing he wanted was for her to witness his heart shattering into pieces. But then, in a moment of pure tenderness, Hazel sat up and gently

kissed his forehead, and a smile broke through his sorrow. In that instant, her innocent affection washed over him like a balm, easing the pain just enough to remind him of the joy still present in his life. He felt profoundly grateful for Hazel; her presence was a beacon of light in his darkest moments.

“I miss her too, Daddy, but Mommy wouldn’t want us to be sad. She would want us to be strong for her. I still don’t know why God would even allow Satan to take her though.”

“I don’t know why either. All I know is that we’re to just continue to trust and love God, no matter what, okay?”

Noah’s eyes grew wide, caught in a moment of disbelief. Hazel’s expression was eerily reminiscent of the countless times he had encountered Christopher’s incredulous gaze whenever he shared his unwavering faith, trust, and love for God. It was a look that screamed *doubt*, as if Noah were some kind of lying lunatic. He had grown accustomed to it from Christopher, but never did he anticipate seeing it reflected in his daughter’s eyes. Rolling his eyes, Noah shook his head.

“Okay, it’s time for sleep.”

“Okay, goodnight, Daddy.”

Noah watched his daughter turn over with her back to him, and for a few seconds, his eyes watered as fear rushed inside him, the same fear that he had felt earlier in the day after talking to Christopher. Shutting his eyes tight, he kicked the fear out of his mind. No, he *wasn’t* crazy. He *wasn’t* insane. He and Hazel *were* to continue trusting and loving God—no matter what. He knew that because he *studied* that and was *taught* that for *several* years. It’s what he knew to be true—in *his* mind anyway.

Later, at around two-thirty in the morning, Noah’s cell phone in his bedroom rang. Noah tried to turn over to grab his phone off the

nightstand table but realized that Hazel lying asleep on his chest was keeping him from doing so. As gently as he could, Noah lifted her off him before reaching over and grabbing his phone.

"Yeah," Noah said in a low, rough voice with a frown and his eyes still closed.

"Noah?" a crying female voice said on the other end of the line.

Noah recognized the crying voice. It was Christopher's girlfriend.

"Halle? What's wrong?"

"Noah, it's *Christopher*! You have to get to the hospital, quick! Christopher was in a car accident, and I'm on my way to the hospital now."

As Halle broke into sobs, Noah sat up in bed with widened eyes. Immediately, he felt his heart beat faster. His entire body instantly heated up like an inferno and felt tingly and numb all over.

"Oh my God!" Noah yelled. "I'm on my way, okay! Just tell me what hospital!"

"Bon Secours St. Mary's Hospital, get there as soon as you can, Noah, *please*!"

Noah took a deep breath and held it for a couple of seconds. *Bon Secours St. Mary's Hospital*. That was the hospital where he was told his wife had died, and now Christopher was there. *Please, God, don't let the same thing that happened to Leah happen to Christopher. Please.*

"Okay, Halle, um—I'm on my way. I'll be there in twenty minutes!"

By Noah speeding close to sixty miles an hour, he was able to arrive at the hospital in less than fifteen minutes. Pulling into a space in the hospital parking lot, Noah closed his eyes and exhaled, thanking God that his speeding didn't result in him being stopped by the police. Rushing out of the car with a sleeping Hazel in his arms, he power

walked over to the double door entrance of the emergency room. However, it seemed that the closer he came to the doors, the further away it was from him. When he did reach the doors, he took his right, trembling hand and wiped away the beads of sweat that had broken out on his forehead.

Walking through the doors, he lay Hazel in a chair in a waiting area to his right. Turning around, he saw Halle talking to a male doctor near the waiting area. Noah closed his eyes and frowned. *Please, God, please let Christopher be okay, please let him be okay.* Opening his eyes, just as Noah walked and then stopped inches away from Halle and the doctor, he saw Halle cry out, and he *knew*. Noah stared at the doctor with his eyes clouded with tears.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, Ms. Livingston," the doctor said before turning and walking away.

Noah stood paralyzed, his heart heavy as he watched Halle weep uncontrollably. A tightness gripped his stomach, a physical manifestation of the anguish swirling within him. He grimaced as a searing pain radiated through his entire being. Desperately, he stumbled to a nearby chair beside Hazel, collapsing into it as his legs threatened to give way beneath him. Wrapping his arms around himself, he shivered as an icy chill enveloped him. Tears cascaded from his eyes, and in that moment of despair, the image of Christopher's radiant smile flashed before his eyes. A fresh wave of sorrow crashed over him, relentless and overwhelming, as if he were drowning in a sea of grief. The sound of his own cries filled the air, but unbeknownst to him, a grotesque tick-like creature clung to the wall above, its presence a sinister reminder of the darkness that had returned. It writhed and wailed, feeding off the very pain that consumed him.

As Noah stood alongside one hundred and fifty other mourners in front

of Christopher's coffin at Fort Lincoln Cemetery in Washington, D.C., he wasn't even listening to the pastor read from the Bible. No, Noah's eyes were locked on Christopher's coffin, and in his mind, he kept repeating what Halle said was the cause of Christopher's death—Christopher's car became stalled in the middle of the street as a truck barreled towards him, *killing* him. It still didn't make sense to Noah. Christopher had a new car that never gave him any issues. So how could his car just *stall* like that? The entire story just didn't add up, but it didn't even matter to Noah at that moment.

All that mattered was the fact that his best friend, his *brother*, was now gone. Despite the other mourners walking away, Noah remained there with his eyes locked on Christopher's coffin. His mind was trying to search for some reason as to *why*. Why did God allow Satan to take away the only friend he had left, and besides Hazel, the only *family member* he had left—*why*? As tears welled up in Noah's eyes, he walked closer to Christopher's coffin and stooped down in front of it. Reaching his arm out, Noah was just about to touch the coffin when Halle walked over and touched his arm.

"Noah, come on," Halle whispered as she wrapped her arm around his shoulder.

Noah stood to his feet, but he couldn't leave. Walking away meant Christopher was truly gone, just like his wife, and just like his father, years ago. It also meant that he was now truly *alone*. He *felt* he had God, but sometimes he wondered if God was even still listening to him anymore. As Noah broke into sobs, Halle hugged him close. At that moment, Noah fought with every fiber of his being the temptation to ask Halle if she could do what Christopher said *he* would do regarding helping him with his rent. Oh yeah, the temptation was strong, but he refused to fall prey to it, not only because it wasn't the right place or time to do so but because his pride wouldn't let him. In fact, the only reason why he accepted financial help from Christopher in the first

place is because Christopher insisted Noah accept it.

"It's going to be okay, Noah," Halle said in a low voice. "It's going to be all right."

No, it *wasn't*, and Noah *knew* it; deep down, he *felt* it. Things would never be *all right* ever again.

When Noah arrived home after fixing Hazel's dinner and then putting her to bed, he walked into the kitchen, sat down at the table, and stared at it with slumped shoulders and a deep frown. *What am I going to do now? How am I going to pay the rent and the bills that I have? God, please show me, tell me what to do—please.*

Closing his eyes, he clasped his hands together.

"Please, God," Noah prayed tearfully, "speak to me, talk to me, show me what to do. Give me some kind of sign that you're listening to me."

Feeling his eyes get heavy, Noah blinked slowly before resting his head on the table and yawning. He was exhausted, both physically and mentally. For a very long time, since the death of his wife, he had been running on empty. Hearing his doorbell ring, he sighed before getting up and walking to the door. Opening it, he stomped his foot, sucked his teeth, and rolled his eyes with a frown. It was August again.

"*What do you want?*" Noah shouted. "*Why do you keep bothering me?*"

"Because Jack wants me to talk to you, Noah, and I'm not giving up until I do. Can I come in so—"

"No!" Noah shouted, his voice started to crack with emotion. "Good God—*August*, I just came from the funeral of my best friend and brother today, so I *don't* feel like hearing your Sylvia Browne nutcase *garbage!*"

August widened his eyes briefly before he frowned at Noah and shook his head.

"Oh," August said in a low voice. "Wow—um—you have my apologies and my sympathy for your loss."

Noah raised a brow at him.

"Yeah, like the fake apology you gave for using my Lord's name in vain the day I first met you?"

August's shoulders dropped, the air leaving his lungs in a long, weary sigh that seemed to deflate his entire posture. He looked away, his gaze drifting over Noah's shoulder toward the empty hallway. *Here we go again.* A dull thrum of irritation pulsed behind August's eyes. August didn't have the stamina for another sermon, especially not when he was the one trying to offer a hand. He let the silence stretch for a beat too long, deliberately letting the weight of his exhaustion hang in the air. Finally, he shook his head slowly and brought his eyes back to Noah's, his expression flat.

"I'm not going to *argue* theology with you on the day you buried your—*brother*, Noah," August said in an almost icy tone. "I don't have the energy for it, and frankly, neither do you. I *mean* it this time when I say I apologize. I happen to know what it's like to lose someone. I lost someone very, *very* close to me three years ago. So, I know what that grief can feel like. There was a time when my grief almost took me *out* of this world."

For a heartbeat, the air between them changed. The sharp, jagged tension that Noah had been wielding like a weapon suddenly seemed to dissolve. August's words didn't just land; they pierced through the armor of Noah's indignation, hitting the raw, unvarnished ache beneath. Noah's brow furrowed, but not in anger this time. His features softened as the "brother" comment hit home.

He looked at August—*really* looked at him—and for a second, the religious barrier vanished. In its place was a grieving man who was

drowning and saw, for the first time, someone who might actually *know* how to swim. Noah's hand on the doorknob loosened, and he leaned slightly backward, a desperate, silent urge to swing the door further back, and invite August in, and then let the words inside of himself spill out—and admit to August how much he was hurting over the loss of his friend and brother. But then, as quickly as the thaw had begun, the frost returned.

Noah remembered who was standing there: the man who didn't respect the Lord's name and who seemed to downright hate Christianity and God and Jesus too. To accept comfort from August felt like a betrayal of the very faith that was supposed to be Noah's only rock. Noah's jaw set, his expression turning back into a mask of cold, pious stone. He straightened his posture, pulling back into the shadows of his doorway.

"Your—*sympathy is noted*," Noah said, his voice regaining its brittle, distant edge. "But I don't *need* the comfort of the *world*, August. I have my *faith*. And that is *more than enough*."

August's gaze dropped, his eyes fixating on a small scuff on the floorboard as he took the hit. He felt a sharp, unexpected sting in his chest—a small, quiet bruise to his spirit. He had opened a small door to his own past, offering a small piece of his own scars to show Noah he wasn't alone, only to have it treated like something contagious or "worldly."

It was offensive, and for a fleeting second, August felt a flicker of genuine hurt. It was the kind of hurt that made you want to turn around, walk away, and let the man drown in his own icy solitude. But then, August took a slow, steadying breath. He looked back up, and though his eyes were still a bit clouded with that lingering offense, the edge of his anger had softened into pity. He knew what grief did to people. He knew it could turn a person's soul into a fortress. August was sure that Noah wasn't just being a religious zealot right now; he was a man in agony, and

August knew that pain often wore the mask of cruelty.

"I'm sure it is," August said almost quietly, "look um, I'll—come back later in the week—"

"No!" Noah shouted with a tearful voice as August turned to walk away. "Why? Why can't you just *leave me alone*?"

"Because *Jack* wants me to *talk* to you, Noah," August said while turning around to face him. "If I had my choice, I'd *never* step foot on your doorstep again; believe me, I *wouldn't*. There are *much* better things I'd rather do with *my* time, but Jack told me to try to talk to you. *Jack, your father.*"

Noah shook his head, frowned, looked away from August, and let out a loud, rough breath as more tears clouded his eyes.

"No—would—would you just—stop?" Noah shouted tearfully. "You don't *know* my *father*—"

"Yes, I do!" August shouted. "Noah, despite what you *think* about me, I *am* here with good intentions. I'm trying to give you a message because Jack *asked* me to."

The fact that August kept bringing up his father, another loved one of his whom he no longer had around, on top of the fact of him having already had to say goodbye to Christopher earlier in the day was starting to break what little emotional strength Noah had left within him. Biting down on his lower lip, Noah clenched his fists, trying to keep his emotional composure as tears streamed.

"August, I'm *asking* you to get—"

Noah stopped as August sighed loudly and frowned deeply before looking down with a shake of his head.

"Oh my God, you know what? No—look—I—I can't do this—*fine*," August said. "You want me to leave? Fine. I'll just tell Jack that I gave it my best shot, trying to give his message to you. You do have my condolences and apologies about your brother, though, Noah. I *really* mean that. Have a nice life, bye."

As August turned and walked away, he stopped and walked back over to Noah's door.

"Wait, just one more thing before I go," August said.

Noah sighed with a roll of his eyes.

"What is it?" Noah replied in a tearful, icy tone.

August stared at him with an annoyed frown before shaking his head and briefly looking away.

"Look—um, whatever you do in your life, don't get the digital ID, all right? I know you—*Christians* believe in the mark of the beast and all that shit, so what I've said should automatically register to you but—"

August stopped and stared Noah up and down with squinted eyes, spiritually reading him.

"I don't know," August continued with a slow shake of his head, "the universe is telling me to remind you just in case. Don't get it, no matter what. Bye, Noah."

As August turned again and walked away, Noah slammed the door, walked into the living room, and began pacing. *The Digital ID*. He was stunned. Of all the things the Malthiest, New Age weirdo could have said, he chose to issue a warning that mirrored Noah's deepest theological fears—the Mark of the Beast. Immediately, Noah froze mid-pace and stared down at the floor with slightly widened eyes. *Wait a minute, if August believes that too...if he's warning me against something that is objectively evil...maybe he isn't such a bad guy after all. Maybe he's just confused about Jesus, but his heart is in the right place.* The thought settled in Noah's mind, *warm and unsettlingly comforting.*

However, just as the notion took root, a voice—immediate, and utterly clear—seared into Noah's skull. It was the voice Noah knew as the Lord's: Noah. *Do not be deceived. He is a wolf in sheep's clothing. The devil knows how to speak truth to bait the foolish.* Noah flinched, clutching the side of his head as Noah heard the Lord's voice again: *August is an evil man who hates me and you cannot be yoked with those who hate the lord*

thy god. Ignore every bit of his words. He is your enemy. The warmth in Noah's mind vanished. The confusion was gone, replaced by a searing, self-righteous certainty. Noah immediately switched back to his original conviction. August wasn't good; he was *dangerous*.

The devil was using half-truths to gain entry. Dropping down on the sofa, Noah covered his face with his hands. He couldn't believe how tragic his life had become, and the constant pestering from the evil August Cameron about the father whom he loved more than anything wasn't making his sorrows any better. Lying back on the sofa, he sighed as he covered his eyes with his arm, and without him realizing it, after about thirty minutes, he had fallen asleep. It wasn't too long after Noah fell asleep, however, that he was jolted awake by loud pounding outside the front door of his home. He sat up on the sofa and frowned with a brow raised. *Good grief, does this August guy ever quit?* Getting up, he walked out of the living room and sighed with annoyance.

"Mr. Hunter, open up!" a male voice yelled outside the door. "We know you're inside! Your car is out front!"

Noah stopped in his tracks in the hallway and frowned. That didn't sound like August. Shaking his head, he walked to the door.

"All right, all right!" Noah yelled as he swung open the door.

Standing on his doorstep were four male U.S. Marshals.

"May I help you?"

"Mr. Hunter, you were sent a court-ordered eviction, and now we have a writ of execution," one of the marshals said.

Noah frowned and then raised his brows and widened his eyes.

"What—an *eviction* notice? But I talked to the landlord, and he said I didn't—"

"Mr. Hunter, you have to vacate the premises immediately; let's go," the second marshal interjected as he pushed past Noah and walked into the house.

As the other three U.S. marshals walked past Noah into the

house, Noah's eyes widened. He pressed his hand to the back of his neck as he felt instant hotness fill him all over, hotness combined with panic and dread. No, this wasn't happening. This *couldn't* be happening. Noah walked into the living room and watched the marshals carry out his furniture, piece by piece.

"Mr. Hunter," one of the marshals said, "you and whomever else is here have five minutes to get whatever personal belongings you need, and then you have to vacate the property."

"What about my furniture? What about all the things I have—"

"We'll place it outside the house, and you can get it from there," the second marshal interrupted.

As Noah continued watching the marshals carry out his furniture, his face turned bright red. Tears clouded his eyes. He pinched his arm at that moment, *hard*, praying that he was still asleep and having a nightmare, but no matter how hard he pinched, he couldn't awaken from something that was *real*. Watching the marshals toss his furniture onto the lawn of his home as if it were trash was the moment when Noah clutched his head with his hands and shut his eyes tight with a deep frown.

Biting down hard on his lower lip and lowering his arms, he clenched his fists, trying his best to hold on to his emotional and mental sanity. After all, Hazel needed him more than ever now. He pushed past one marshal and dashed up the stairs to the second floor. He rushed into his bedroom and ran over to Hazel.

"Hazel," Noah called as he shook her, "Hazel, get up, sweetheart, come on."

Hazel moaned and turned over on her side with her back to him.

"Hazel—"

"No, Daddy, I don't want to. I'm sleepy."

"No, Hazel, get up. We have to leave, come on. I need you to get up, go into your room, and get dressed."

As Hazel sat up in bed, Noah rushed over to his dresser drawer and urgently yanked it open. As tears dropped from his eyes, Noah grabbed his clothes and threw them on the bed. Then, he heard it—the loud chirping that sounded like hundreds of crickets. It was the same sound he heard the day he was fired. Looking up and spinning around, his eyes searched for the origin of the chirping, and he saw it in the corner of the ceiling. Clinging to the ceiling was the same creature he had seen once before, the enormous, long, black, bony, tick-like creature with large, slanted, solid black eyes and an enormous head. Yes, Noah recognized what he saw quite well.

“What *are* you?” Noah said in a low voice. “Why are you *here*?”

With its head dropped back, the creature let out a loud, disembodied wail as its body vibrated, resulting in Noah jumping back and widening his eyes. Noah’s body became stiff, almost as if it was frozen.

“Noah, don’t show *fear*!” a male voice whispered in Noah’s ear. “They feed off of *fear*! Relax yourself! Relax your mind and tell it you’re not *afraid*!”

Noah shut his eyes and frowned. He wasn’t sure whether he should listen to the voice speaking to him or not, but as Noah opened his eyes and saw the creature open its mouth wider and a long, red split tongue shot out of it, Noah yelled while rushing back even further towards the dresser behind him.

“No, Noah!” the male voice yelled. “Don’t show fear! *Fight* your fear! *Fight* it!”

Noah closed his eyes again and nodded. Somehow, he knew the voice he heard was right. It was obvious that the creature was trying to make Noah afraid, and Noah couldn’t give the parasite that satisfaction. Clenching his fists, Noah took deep breaths, held them for several seconds, and then exhaled. He did that six times, and each time he carried out the practice, his mind visualized himself walking along the

boardwalk of Myrtle Beach in South Carolina.

He visualized the ocean waves crashing against the sand under a clear blue, bright, sunny sky. He forced himself to feel the warmth of the air, to smell the scent of the salt, seagulls, and sand that permeated the air. As his mind and soul became lost in the euphoric vision, he heard a loud, vibrating wail. Opening his eyes, he saw the creature vibrating and shaking uncontrollably before vanishing into a thick cloud of black smoke.

Noah briefly smiled and closed his eyes. He wasn't sure how his mental vision had caused the creature to vanish, but he was just relieved it did. As Hazel settled into the front passenger seat of Noah's car, he busied himself in the yard, gathering as many of their belongings as he could. The weight of his neighbors' stares pressed down on him—some peeking through their windows while others lingered on their porches, observing his every move. Embarrassment washed over him as he shut his eyes, his cheeks flushing with heat, making his face red.

When he opened his eyes, he noticed several framed pictures of himself, Leah, and Hazel lying on the ground. Just then, his gaze met that of his next-door neighbor, Ryan, but Noah quickly looked away, unable to maintain eye contact for more than a fleeting moment. With urgency, Noah stood up, pivoted, and strode briskly back to his car. He tossed the photos into the back seat through a window that was partially rolled down, then hurriedly slid into the driver's seat. His heart raced, pounding against his palm as he gripped his chest. With a shaky hand, he turned the ignition and accelerated away from the scattered furniture, leaving behind the home that had once been his sanctuary.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was close to eight at night as Hazel lay asleep in Noah's car's front passenger seat while Noah paced outside his car in the parking lot of Richmond's City Diner.

"Pastor Thomas, *please*, we have *nowhere* to go," Noah said on his cell phone.

"Noah, I honestly wish I could, but Mary and I are out of town. I don't know what to *do* for you—"

"Well, what about the benevolence fund at the church?" Noah asked.

"Oh, that fund is empty, you know that," Pastor Thomas responded. "Every dime that comes in for tithes these days is going for the upkeep of the church. I'm sorry, I really am."

Noah sighed with a shake of his head. Hearing a beep on the line, Noah looked at his phone screen for a second.

"Oh," Noah said, "Tim is on the other line, so let me see what he can do."

"All right," Pastor Thomas replied, "I'll be praying for you and Hazel."

"Thanks," Noah stated before switching the line over. "Tim, thanks for calling me back."

"Yeah, no problem. I got your message but—Noah—we don't have any room here, I'm sorry."

"Oh, come on, Tim, not you too. We don't have *any* place to go. I mean, can't we just stay with you all until—"

"Look, you know we would say yes if we could, but we *can't*. Have you tried calling anyone else?"

“Yeah, I already called everyone else at church, and they all said no, some in the rudest ways at that. They either said they didn’t want to get involved or they claimed they didn’t have space.”

“Well, how about Miller? Or Sarah and Carter? What did they say?”

“Miller said he was out of town and couldn’t help, not even with a few bucks, and Sarah and Carter told us to try to sneak in and stay in one of the warehouses over on Eubank Road until we figure something out, and they have a *seven-bedroom house*!”

“Well, I’m sorry, Noah, I really am.”

“But you all are supposed to be my church family, my *friends*—”

“We *are*, Noah, but come on, you’re asking a *lot* of us here—”

“Asking a *lot*? Tim, my daughter and I are on the *street*—”

“Look, okay, *okay*! Um—what about *shelters*? Have you called *them*?”

“Yeah, I’ve been calling several of them, but they’re all filled or have waiting lists. Look, you can’t even help with a few dollars or something—”

“Noah, I *can’t*. Miriam and I just got cable, and then we have other bills, so we have to save money for all of that.”

“Jeez, just forget it, Tim. You know, I get it. You and everyone else just couldn’t possibly help my daughter and me. I get it, all right?”

Before Timothy could say another word, Noah disconnected the call. As Noah slammed his fists against the side of his car, he saw headlights. It was Jacob. Noah exhaled with a quick close of his eyes, and the constricted muscles in his face relaxed. Noah was sure Jacob would help. After all, Jacob was Noah’s closest ally within the church. As Jacob jumped out of his Lincoln Navigator, Noah walked over to him and exchanged a handshake and a hug with him.

“Sorry, I tried to get here as fast as I could,” Jacob said.

“No, it’s fine. You’re here now.”

"Yeah, so um—*wow*, they really just tossed you and the kid on the street?"

"Yeah, and I've been calling the landlord for hours now, but I keep getting his voicemail. I left three messages already, but—nothing."

"Huh, you two are in a really tough spot then."

"Yeah, that's why I called you. I mean, I know you only have a small, two-bedroom house, but it's only you there and I—"

"Oh, whoa, hold on, I know where you're going with this, and before you go any further, let me tell you, I can't do it."

"What? Why not?"

"Because my daughter's now staying in the second bedroom, sorry, bud."

"I thought she was with Rachel."

"Well, she was, but Rachel moved to Seattle with James, so Hannah came to live with me. She said she'd rather die than live in boring Seattle."

Noah sighed with a shake of his head and a roll of his eyes.

"Well, can't we just crash in the living room? I mean because seriously—we don't have anywhere to go."

"Hey, I get it, I really do, but I can't, okay? I'm sorry, but in the meantime, you need to focus on what you've done wrong for God to put you in this situation."

Noah shook his head with a frown before staring at him with widened eyes. *This guy couldn't possibly be serious.*

"What? What do you mean by that? I haven't done *anything* wrong."

"No, of course you did," Jacob replied. "I mean—I don't want to be mean or anything, but first off, you were married to a *colored* woman whom you had a *kid* with. Do you really think God *approved* of that? Then on top of that, you had that ghetto—*darkie* best friend of yours. I mean, Noah, God doesn't *want* his people linked with—vile humans of

iniquity, and that's *exactly* what black people are. You should know that."

Noah stared at Jacob with a deep frown, trying to decipher if he really just heard what he thought he did.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, *what* did you just say?" Noah asked in an unmistakable cold tone with a brow raised.

Jacob sighed nervously and looked away with a shake of his head.

"Look," Jacob said, "I'm—I'm sorry, but—okay, let's look at this another way. Noah, God doesn't allow things like this to happen to his people unless they've done something wrong. So, just fess up and admit it. You've done things wrong in your life for God to send you through something like this. I mean, what's happening to you is actually—*your* fault. You didn't follow his word, and you didn't do enough to please him."

Noah pursed his lips and rolled his eyes, trying his best to resist the temptation to sucker punch Jacob at that moment.

"I didn't do enough to *please* him? What do you call me neglecting my *wife's* plea to come pick her up because I wanted to stay and do God's *will* during Bible study!"

"Yeah, but obviously, that wasn't enough, or you wouldn't have suffered the way you did and the way you are now. I mean, come *on*, Noah, you're in your forties. You said you've been a Christian since you were what—in high school or since you were in college or whatever? You should know how this goes by now with God. If you're not a good and obedient servant to him, things like this will happen to ya. Face it, this is *your fault*."

Noah shook his head.

"Wow, you know *what*? You can—"

Noah stopped as Jacob's cell phone ringtone went off.

"Oh, hold on. That's Hannah. I have to take this," Jacob said as he backed away from Noah and reached for his cell phone in his back pocket.

"Jacob, no, I—"

“Look, I gotta go, but I’ll be praying that God helps you despite your sins, all right?”

Before Noah could say anything else, Jacob jumped back into his Navigator and sped off. Noah’s anger boiled over, his nostrils flared, and his face burned with rage. He slammed his hands against the trunk of his car as disbelief washed over him. How could his entire church family just abandon him like that? Where in the Bible did it justify such betrayal? It *didn’t*.

And then for Jacob to spew racist garbage about Noah’s wife and *friend*? Noah balled his fists and clenched his jaw before shutting his eyes tight, trying to resist the urge to drive to Jacob’s house and beat him to a bloody pulp right on his front lawn. Lowering his head, Noah frowned and then sighed. In that crushing moment, he felt the weight of Christopher’s absence more than ever. If Christopher were still alive, he and Hazel would have *had* a place to stay. Instead, his mind drifted to August’s rehab and homeless shelter, but the address Noah saw on the flyer eluded him. He considered waiting outside the house he was evicted from in the hopes that August might return, but deep down, he knew that was a futile wish. August made it clear that he would never bother him again. With a heavy sigh, Noah sucked his teeth, realizing the harsh truth: he was utterly alone with no one left to turn to in his time of need.

Noah and Hazel sat at a booth inside City Diner, where Noah poured sugar into his coffee while Hazel twirled spaghetti around and around on her fork. His mind kept replaying the moment he arrived at Bon Secours St. Mary’s Hospital and learned that he had lost his best friend and brother forever, along with replaying the eviction that took place. Feeling a pain shoot through his forehead, Noah rubbed his forehead with a sigh and briefly closed his eyes. After a few seconds, he opened

his eyes and saw Hazel pushing her plate away.

"You should eat something, honey," Noah said.

"I'm not hungry. Daddy, God has abandoned us."

"What? No, he hasn't."

"Yes, he has. Look at all that's happened. We lost everything, and God doesn't even care."

"Yes, he *does*, okay? Just because bad things happen, we *can't* blame God. This is not his fault, he—"

Before Noah could finish, Hazel jumped up and ran out of the diner.

"Hazel, wait!" Noah shouted as he jumped up and ran after her.

As Hazel ran to Noah's car, Noah ran to her, stooped in front of her, and took hold of her arms.

"Hazel, *wait!* Look—"

"No, Daddy! I *hate* God!"

"No, Hazel, don't say that! Don't *ever* say that. This isn't God *doing* this."

Immediately, he heard it—the chirping again. Noah whipped his head to his left with widened, alert eyes. It sounded to Noah as if the sounds were all around him and Hazel.

"Whose fault is it then?" Hazel shouted between sobs.

"I told you, sweetie, this is all the *devil* doing this."

"Then why doesn't God *stop* him? I just want our *life* back!"

In a tender embrace, Noah drew Hazel close, his arms a sanctuary as her sobs erupted, fierce and unyielding. A deep frown marred his features, his own eyes blurring with the sting of tears, a silent testament to the shared agony that knotted his heart. Every shiver that wracked Hazel's body echoed in his soul, a painful resonance of their united despair. The questions that haunted Hazel's mind now prowled his own, leaving a trail of confusion and sorrow. Just then, a slender, red-headed waitress came out of the diner and stared at Noah with a

brow raised.

“Hey, mister, you can’t just run out of here like that! You gotta pay your bill!”

Noah stood before taking Hazel’s hand into his. Hazel, her eyes wet with tears, clung to his side like a traumatized barnacle.

“I’m sorry. My daughter got upset. We’re coming in to pay right now.”

Noah walked back inside the diner and toward the diner’s counter, and pulled two, crumpled ten dollar bills from his pocket, as Hazel shuffled beside him, holding onto him close.

“Here you go,” Noah said, pushing the bills toward the waitress.

The waitress didn’t reach for the cash, however. Instead, she shook her head, her face tired.

“Sir, we can’t take that.”

Noah frowned and slightly shook his head.

“What? Why not?”

“Didn’t you see the sign in the window?” the waitress responded. “We only accept the digital ID now; the corporate policy changed last week. Or, you know, if you have a credit card, we can take that.”

Noah’s blood ran cold. He felt a sudden, dizzying panic that wasn’t about hunger or homelessness, but something far deeper. His mind flashed back to August Cameron, the Malthiest, standing on his porch.

“Look—um, whatever you do in your life, don’t get the digital ID, all right? I know you—Christians believe in the mark of the beast and all that shit, so what I’ve said should automatically register to you but—”

The words were a horrifying, prophetic echo in Noah’s mind.

“I...I don’t have a digital ID yet,” Noah stammered, his eyes slightly wide. “I don’t have a credit card or a debit card either. All I have is cash.”

Noah felt his composure start to crack. The waitress sighed,

crossing her arms.

“Look, I get it, but you and the little girl ordered food. You have to pay with *something*.”

Noah felt the tears well up immediately, the dam of his stress breaking under the weight of this impossible demand. He was already at his limit as it was. He leaned forward, his voice thick with emotion, nearly a whisper, while Hazel squeezed his thigh tighter.

“Ma’am, please,” Noah started, his eyes shining with unshed tears. “We were just evicted from our home earlier. We have nowhere to go, all I *have* is this cash. Please, if—if you can’t accept that, can you *please* just let us go this time? We won’t ever come back, I *promise*. But I don’t have anything else, I really don’t. *Please*.”

Noah felt the humiliation burning his cheeks as his daughter watched. The sight of the man, and the small, terrified girl holding onto him, slightly tugged at the waitress’s heart. She looked past him toward the empty tables, then back at his tear-filled eyes before letting out a harsh, quick breath.

“Go on. Get out of here,” she hissed, her voice low and rough. “But don’t you come back in here less you got money, all right?”

Noah briefly closed his eyes and exhaled loudly before nodding and wiping streaming tears away.

“Thank God—and thank you,” Noah said in a tearful voice, “thank you ever so much.”

The waitress nodded as Noah walked out of the diner with Hazel. As Noah walked to his car, he could perfectly understand why Hazel had her meltdown just a few moments earlier about God, because Noah’s fervent pleas for understanding the reason why their lives had become a battleground, with happiness besieged by shadows at every turn, remained elusive. Noah found himself grappling with profound bewilderment, unable to comprehend why they were left to endure such torment, seemingly abandoned to the whims of a malevolent force intent

on their destruction.

Under the cloak of a starless night, Noah and Hazel found themselves seeking refuge in the cramped quarters of his car. The relentless patter of rain against the car's roof created a monotonous rhythm that was both soothing and a constant reminder of their predicament. While inside, the air was biting cold. Noah, stretched uncomfortably across the front seats, had draped his only blanket over Hazel, who was curled up in the back. His concern for her comfort outweighed his own need for warmth.

The frigid air turned his cheeks a rosy red, his fingers were numb, and his breath was visible, a testament to the car's inability to shield them fully from the cold outside. The sight of her, sleeping in the cold, metallic shell—their home now—shattered the brittle composure he had fought all day to maintain. *Look at her—she shouldn't know this kind of night. She should be in a bed, under a real roof, not shivering in a car because her father couldn't keep it together.* Shame swelled within him, hot and brackish.

His mind then began to replay the horrors of the last, several hours: *being evicted from our home with all of our belongings tossed to the curb. The begging, the humiliation of having to plead with a stranger, a minimum-wage waitress, for the basic human dignity of a meal, while my own daughter watched.*

Closing his eyes, Noah felt a wave of scalding despair wash over him, a physical blow that left him gasping. *How could this have happened? I did everything right. I worked. I prayed. I believed. She is only eight years old, God! She should be tucked into her own bed, safe, and warm. She shouldn't have to feel cold because her father failed her.* The pain coalesced into a sharp, intolerable knot in his chest. His vision blurred as the sting of tears overwhelmed him. He felt the terrifying,

absolute certainty that he was about to break. Noah fumbled blindly on the dashboard until his trembling fingers closed around the familiar, worn leather of his Bible. He needed the anchor of his religion. He flipped it open, his eyes landing on Psalm 27.

"The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear..." he whispered, but the words blurred as if the page itself recoiled from him.

His throat closed and his breath hitched. A single tear splattered against the print. *I can't even read a promise without falling apart.* The words of Psalm 27 felt almost like meaningless black marks on a white page. Noah felt too heavy, too *defeated*. He dropped the Bible onto the seat with a muffled thud, covered his face with his cold, numb hands, and broke down. The sobs were heavy, guttural, and *absolute*, but they were silent, trapped deep in his throat so as not to wake Hazel. His shoulders shook as tears streamed down his face and soaked the denim of his shirt. He was utterly, devastatingly *helpless*. The failure was complete.

Minutes bled by. At last, the storm inside him ebbed to shuddering breaths. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, took several ragged breaths, and picked up the Bible again. He stared at the page again, but the familiar words refused to take root. Psalm 27 blurred before his eyes as sleep beckoned, drawing him under. Sinking deeper into the seat, Noah's heart whispered earnest prayers into the cold air, seeking not only protection and guidance but the answers that had eluded him for days.

As Noah stood in line at Richmond's Saint Bridget Catholic Church, waiting to enter, his brows clenched, and his heart became heavy with the sight of so many in need. The line was long, wrapping all the way around the corner of the church. Despite the overwhelming length, Noah was surprisingly lucky; he was only the third one in line instead of

being all the way at the back. The image of a man holding the hand of a young boy just a few spaces ahead in line struck Noah deeply, resulting in Noah looking away with a frown and a shake of his head. The image was a stark reminder of the widespread suffering and poverty that seemed incongruous with the notion of a benevolent deity. Standing in the entrance doorway was Bishop Parsley, a beefy, gray-haired man in his early sixties with a beard. Bishop Parsley greeted Noah with a warm smile as it became Noah's turn to walk up to the door entrance.

"God bless you, brother," Bishop Parsley said as he shook Noah's hand. "Do you have your digital ID ready for verification?"

Noah's brow furrowed with a flicker of annoyance.

"What? No, no, I don't," he replied.

Bishop Parsley's smile didn't waver, but his eyes held a professional regret.

"Oh, well then I'm sorry, but the church is only helping those with the digital ID now."

Noah stared at the Bishop, stunned and speechless for several seconds. He felt the weight of the long line waiting behind him.

"What? Are you serious?" Noah finally managed, his voice strained. "You won't help anyone who doesn't have a digital ID? But you're a *church*, you're *supposed* to help people."

"Yes, but the digital ID is our new policy. And frankly, I'm glad we have it," the Bishop said, lowering his voice. "It assures legitimacy of need. The ID tells us which ones have a legitimate need, and which doesn't."

Noah looked behind him at the silent, waiting line.

"So, you're telling me that *everyone* in this line actually has a digital ID?"

"Yeah, every single one," the Bishop confirmed with a nod, which surprised and angered Noah even more.

"Okay well—look—I don't have one," Noah stated, his voice now

rising with raw emotion. “So, what am I supposed to do? My daughter and I need a place to stay.”

“Oh, I thought you were here for a meal,” the Bishop said. “Oh, oh, I’m sorry, but we don’t offer shelter anymore at the church. We had to close the shelter down six months ago because of budget cuts.”

Noah’s shoulders sagged. Sighing, he looked away from the Pastor, feeling utterly defeated.

“Have you tried calling two one-one or The Salvation Army?” the Bishop continued. “I know for a fact that The Salvation Army has a shelter, but even *they’re* going to need to see a digital ID in order for them to help. I thoroughly encourage you to go get that digital ID. You could then be able to access a *wealth* of helpful resources for you and your daughter.”

Noah turned his intense gaze back to the Bishop, a flicker of disdain in his eyes. He slowly shook his head, rolled his eyes at the sheer institutional blindness, and walked away from the entrance and the long line of people who were all, somehow, compliant. He walked back to his car, got back into the driver’s seat and stared out the windshield with his mind spinning. He couldn’t believe that this was actually happening, that the digital ID was taking *that* much of a foothold in every single, everyday situation of life. Noah shook his head with a brief close of his eyes. *I come to a church, a supposed house of God, for help, and they deny me because I don’t have what’s basically the Mark of the beast.*

What choice do I have though? I can’t let Hazel freeze in this car. I have to find a better place for her. Maybe I should just cave in and get the digital ID. Just as the thought of surrender formed, August’s words echoed in his memory, the warning sharp and immediate:

“Look—um, whatever you do in your life, don’t get the digital ID, all right? I know you—Christians believe in the mark of the beast and all that shit, so what I’ve said should automatically register to you but—”

Noah snatched his cell phone from the console. His fingers, still

cold, navigated quickly to the YouTube app. He searched: August Cameron. He found August's channel instantly and clicked on the video titled: "Enki and the AI/Digital Agenda." On the screen, August Cameron was pacing back and forth in front of a chalkboard, addressing a class of both young and older adults.

"Every single aspect of AI and this digital world you see accelerating around you is Enki's agenda," August said passionately. "This upcoming digital ID system, the microchipping and the uploading of consciousness programs that are soon to come—it's all his. Enki wants every single one of us connected to his digital world. Once we're hooked into his AI world, he can have us permanently enslaved here on this matrix prison planet, and as a result, he can then feed off the low-vibrational, despairing energy—which is loosh—that we bring forth—forever."

August stopped pacing, stepped behind a podium, and opened up a folder in front of him.

"This is why it's so important to not get the digital ID, no matter what they tell you, because they'll sell it as being a cool system that will only enhance your life, but nothing could be further from the truth. With the digital ID system, people will be tracked by the powers that be all day, every day, and that's nothing but Orwellian dictatorship. That system is completely steeped in evilness."

Noah stopped the video. He frowned with confusion. Enki? He had never heard of that name before. However, Noah realized that it didn't matter who this "Enki" was. Noah knew who God was, and Noah knew that what August was saying was correct—there indeed was something profoundly evil with all of the digital and AI systems taking shape within every aspect of living. That reason alone was enough. Noah made a mental promise to himself, right then and there: he would not get the digital ID, no matter if he and Hazel needed to find a place to stay or not. Noah would just have to find another way, any other way that didn't consist of him caving in to evil. With a heavy heart, he turned

the ignition and accelerated away from the church parking lot.

Arriving back at the unemployment center again, Noah knew he had to keep trying to find a place for him and Hazel to stay.

“I know, but come on, there’s no room at *any* of the shelters?” Noah asked over the phone while sitting in one of the rooms. “I mean, my daughter and I have to go *somewhere—please.*”

Instantly, Noah gasped as his eyes widened.

“Okay, whoa, hold on, let me get a pen and paper to write that down.”

Noah reached over and grabbed a flyer sitting on a nearby bookshelf and grabbed a pen sitting a few feet away on a desk.

“Okay, and that’s the only one?”

Noah nodded as he scribbled on the flyer.

“All right, and you’re sure they still have a shelter?”

Noah sighed with another nod.

“Great—oh wait, they don’t require people to have the digital ID to stay there, do they?”

Noah nods and sighs with a brief close of his eyes.

“Good, thank God, and thank you too,” Noah said, “thank you ever so much. God bless you.”

Hanging up the phone, Noah closed his eyes and mouthed a quiet thank-you message to God for giving him and Hazel the blessing of finding shelter for the night and perhaps longer, if possible. It relieved Noah that God was still with him—even if it didn’t entirely *feel* like it.

For Noah, it was almost a two-hour drive through heavy traffic after

picking Hazel up from school and then making his way to the homeless shelter in Washington, D.C. It would be nighttime by the time they got there. However, at least they would have a roof over their head. That was all that mattered to him. As he was just minutes away from the shelter, he looked through his rearview mirror at Hazel and could tell the long trip was getting to her.

She couldn't keep her eyes open for more than two seconds and had yawned three times in just thirty seconds. *We're almost there, sweetheart, and once we are, you'll be able to get plenty of sleep through the night.* As he pulled into the shelter's parking lot, the bright, red, illuminated sign that read *D.C. Village Emergency Shelter* welcomed him. Woods surrounded the entire building, and a rural road led the path away from the shelter. Noah put the car in park and turned to face Hazel, shaking her to awaken her from her sleep.

"Honey, wake up. We're home for the night."

Hazel yawned and opened her eyes as Noah got out of the car's driver's side. They walked inside the shelter's lobby, where a plump, gum-popping, and chewing female clerk with braids sitting behind a desk greeted them. As Noah walked up to the desk, he smiled and nodded politely, which the clerk ignored as she looked up at him, blew a bubble in his direction, and popped it.

"Yeah, how can I help you, sir?" the clerk said in an almost dead tone.

"Um, we need a place to stay, and I heard there was space here—"

"Here, sign this," the clerk interjected as she slid a clipboard with papers over to him.

As Noah signed his name, date, and other information on a top sheet of stacked papers, the clerk picked up her phone and texted away. Hazel stared at the clerk's emerald green ring she was wearing and smiled.

“Ooh, I like your ring, miss,” Hazel said to the clerk.

The clerk raised an eyebrow at Hazel and then flashed a distrustful smirk at her.

“Oh, thank you. You cute, what’s your name?”

“My name’s Hazel, and my dad here is Noah.”

The clerk stared at Noah and then stared back at Hazel with an eyebrow raised.

“He’s your dad? Your *real* dad?”

Noah stopped writing and shot his eyes up at her with a frown.

“Yeah, of course, I’m her *real* dad.”

As the clerk stared at Noah with an eyebrow raised, Noah slammed his pen down and sighed.

“She’s the child of a *black* mother—my late *wife*, and a *white* father—*me*, all right? I mean, for Pete’s sake, do you need to see her birth certificate so you can match the *father’s* name on there to the name on my *driver’s* license?”

The clerk rolled her eyes before snatching the clipboard away from him.

“Come on. I’ll show you to a room.”

“Great, thank you,” Noah replied with a roll of his eyes before following the clerk down a corner hallway.

As Noah, Hazel, and the clerk walked down the hallway, he observed his surroundings. There was a long, blue stripe along the white wall on one side of the hallway and a long, orange stripe along the white wall on the other side of the hallway. Seeing that and the white and gray checkered floor let Noah know that the shelter had to have been a former hospital.

Turning down another hallway, they stopped at the wooden, closed-door room. At the other end of the hallway were two women arguing, one black and one white, both slender, both looking like strung-out drug users, with them both having numerous red needle

points all over the areas of skin on display.

"Bitch, you gonna give me my fucking money!" the black woman yelled to the white woman. "I swear to God, youngin', or I'll fuck you up in this motherfucka!"

"Bitch, you ain't gonna do shit! I'll lunge on your bitch ass, then what?"

"Do it then, ho! Do it and see what happens!"

Noah looked down at Hazel and was thankful she was nodding in and out of sleep, not paying attention to what was happening with the women. As the clerk at the front desk unlocked the door to the room, she, Noah, and Hazel walked inside. The room resembled a patient room with a hospital bed on the left side and another hospital bed on the far right side. A door to the bathroom was in the left-hand corner. Dim lights illuminated the room on the wall above the beds.

"All right, so this is it," the clerk said, "you two will be in this room alone for now, but if someone else is brought in, then they'll have the bed on the other side of the room. Breakfast is from six until ten in the morning."

"Okay, um, do you all serve dinner here?" Noah asked.

"Yeah, but that was an hour ago."

"Oh," Noah said in a dejected tone.

"Daddy, what are we going to eat? I'm hungry."

"There's a um—snack and soda machine in the main hall," the clerk said. "You can get something from there."

"Great, thanks," Noah replied.

"Yeah, all right, have a nice night," the clerk said before leaving.

Noah picked Hazel up, sat her on the bed, and briefly searched her face, seeking her approval regarding the shelter.

"At least the room looks nice," she said before yawning.

"Yeah, I mean—it's better than the car, right?"

She nodded and shrugged. Noah sighed and nodded as well.

"Yeah, okay, well, I think I have about—"

Noah stopped, reached into his back pocket, and pulled out a five-dollar bill.

"Well—I have a little something to buy you some food for the night, okay?"

"What about you, Daddy? You're hungry too."

Noah smiled as he gently caressed the side of her face.

"Oh, don't worry about me, sweetheart, you're the one who has to come first."

Hazel hugged Noah before he helped her off the bed, and they left the room. Going out into the hallway, they saw the white woman and the black woman again, still arguing with each other, but now they had moved closer up the hallway. Both women were in each other's faces, about to engage in a fight.

"What you goin' do, bitch?" the black woman yelled to the white woman.

"What you *think* I'm gonna do?" the white woman yelled back. "I'm gonna swing on your dyke ass!"

"Well then swing, bitch!" the black woman shouted. "Swing and see what the fuck I do!"

Within seconds, the white woman swung and hit the black woman in the face, and the fight began. Noah sighed with a brief close of his eyes and a frown. That was the last thing he needed his daughter to see. That was the last thing *he* even wanted to see at that moment. Hazel gasped and looked up at Noah with wide eyes of shock.

"Daddy, they're fighting!"

Noah picked Hazel up in his arms.

"I know, we'll go around the other way."

As Noah walked down the hall in the opposite direction, he turned the corner and came upon a huge, cafeteria-style room. The sign above the room's double doors read, "main hall." Numerous homeless

men and women filled the hall.

“Nah, man, all I’m saying is, fuck that shit!” a homeless man shouted to the others in the hall. “Y’all bastards fucking mad ‘cause we had four years of Trump, and that’s why y’all put in fucking office, Sleepy Joe! Guess what though? We got Trump *back* in fucking office *again*! So how about *that*?”

The homeless men and women in the hall started laughing, while some started cheering.

“Man, fuck out of here with that *bullshit*!” a homeless man shouted, which generated more laughter.

Noah sighed and rolled his eyes with annoyance. Ever since Hazel was born, he made sure she was never allowed to hear anything vulgar or obscene, and he wanted to make sure he kept it that way. With a shake of his head, he turned on his heels and walked with Hazel away from the hall.

“Daddy, I thought we were going to get something to eat,” Hazel asked.

“We are,” he responded.

As Noah returned to their room, he sat her on the bed and stooped in front of her.

“Okay, I’m going to go back to the main hall and get us something to eat, and I want you to stay put in this room, all right?”

“Okay, Daddy.”

Noah kissed her on the forehead.

“Great, thanks, honey. I’ll be right back.”

Hazel nodded and slid back on the bed as Noah stood, turned, and walked out. As Noah returned to the main hall entrance, he stopped, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, bracing himself for all the obscenity he was sure to hear again. Granted, he hadn’t always been a Christian. He had used some of that same vulgar language numerous times before he came to Christ himself, but not now that he knew better.

He hadn't said a single swear word or anything vulgar in decades, thanks to his strong faith and belief in Christ. However, he knew he couldn't control everyone else's actions. So, upon opening his eyes, he walked into the hall and walked over to the snack and soda machine, trying his best to block out what he was hearing.

"Nah, fuck y'all!" a homeless man shouted. "Y'all know goddamn well that more of us black people have been shot at and killed since that motherfucka took office!"

"So what?" Eric, another homeless man, replied in a drunken stupor. "Y'all killing your own goddamn selves every day! Shit, *everybody* killing *everybody* every goddamn day 'cause we ain't got *shit* else to do no way!"

As Eric and all the other homeless men and women laughed and cheered, Noah groaned and held the side of his head, feeling a sharp pain strike through it from the loud noise. After getting two sodas out of the soda machine, Noah put the rest of his money into the snack machine. However, after Noah pressed a code on the snack machine for two bags of potato chips to drop, the machine let out a beeping sound without the chips dropping. Noah banged the side of the machine, but that failed to allow the chips to move anywhere.

"Oh, come on," Noah said before sighing and hitting his fist against the side of the snack machine several times.

Unbeknownst to Noah, a Puerto Rican man walked up behind him with glassy, dilated, red pupils, a sign of how drunk he was. As Noah shook the snack machine several times, the Puerto Rican man stared at Noah as if Noah were a disgusting insect that needed to be squashed.

"Hey, man, this is my snack machine," the Puerto Rican man said in a slurred speech. "Get the hell away from it, *now*."

Noah looked over at the man and smirked with a shake of his head.

"Uh, yeah, well, I don't see your name on it."

“Motherfucka, I don’t *have* to have my name on it! You’re at my goddamn machine, so *step*, man!”

“Look, why don’t you go bully someone else? I’m trying to get my daughter and me something to eat, all right—”

“Man, I don’t give a fuck what you’re trying to do! Touch the fucking machine again, and I’m going to drop-kick your ass!”

Noah shut his eyes and let out a deep breath. He recognized that the man was looking to provoke a confrontation, and Noah was determined to rise above it, not for his own benefit but for the man’s. Reflecting on his past, Noah recalled that before embracing Christianity, he was never one to instigate a fight, but he was never one to shy away from one either.

His father had instilled in him the skills needed to defend himself, and throughout his life, he had *never* lost a fight. As the surrounding homeless individuals became quiet and focused on the escalating situation between Noah and the Puerto Rican man, Noah narrowed his eyes and momentarily bit down on the left side of his lower lip, striving to maintain his composure.

Noah turned around, faced the Puerto Rican man quickly, and widened his eyes at what he saw in front of him. On the shoulders of the Puerto Rican man was the head of the hideous-looking, tick-like creature he had seen in the bathroom of his house. While vibrating, it stared at him, smiling. *Why? Why was he seeing it? What did it mean?*

“What you goin’ do, motherfucka?” the Puerto Rican man said while pushing Noah.

Noah shut his eyes briefly and shook his head before the Puerto Rican man pushed Noah again while laughing. Noah sighed with a roll of his eyes. He didn’t care at that point *what* he saw on the Puerto Rican man’s shoulders. He just wanted to get the man off his back.

“Look, get out of my face, all right?” Noah yelled in anger before turning his back to the Puerto Rican man.

"Damn, Nicky, he said that shit like he *meant* it!" Eric said to the Puerto Rican man, which resulted in laughter from the other homeless people.

"Man, *fuck* this!" Nicky shouted before grabbing Noah's arm.

Instantly, Noah spun around and punched Nicky hard across the jaw, resulting in Nicky stumbling back a foot or two. After shaking his head like a wild man, Nicky lunged towards Noah, and Noah hit Nicky again in the face, making Nicky's nose bleed.

"I said *back off*!" Noah yelled with anger.

Right then, Noah grabbed his head and frowned, feeling a strong vibrational energy shoot out of him. He would've collapsed to his knees had he not grabbed hold of the table nearby. Shooting his head over at Nicky, he no longer saw the head of the creature on Nicky's shoulders. It had disappeared.

"Damn, he straight stole your ass, Nicky!" a young homeless man shouted, resulting in all the other homeless people laughing.

Nicky was about to lunge again towards Noah, but as the clerk from the lobby desk walked in, Eric grabbed Nicky's arm.

"Shit, come on, Nicky, here that bitch come," Eric said.

"This ain't over, motherfucka!" Nicky yelled to Noah. "I'll get you back *later*! You can count on it, *tu hijo de puta*!"

Leaning over on the table, Noah shook his head with a brief close of his eyes, trying to regain his strength, as Nicky and Eric disappeared into the crowd, out of sight.

"Hey, I can hear y'all all the way down the hall!" the clerk shouted. "Y'all gonna have to keep that noise down, seriously, 'cause y'all way too loud!"

"Ma'am," Noah said, "this guy tried to start a fight with me and—"

"Patrice, he lying like shit!" a young, homeless woman shouted, which resulted in laughter from the other homeless people.

"Ma'am, I'm *not* lying," Noah said.

“Okay, so what you want me to do about it?” the clerk said. “I mean because this ain’t school. We can’t send him to the principal’s office or nothing.”

As the homeless people laughed, Noah frowned and tilted his head with upset.

“No, I know, I’m not *dumb*, lady,” Noah snapped, “I was telling you because I thought you should know in case—never mind, look—the snack machine doesn’t work.”

The clerk kicked the front of the snack machine hard and two bags of potato chips dropped down.

“Ain’t that some shit?” an older, homeless woman shouted. “Hey, Pat, the machine broke for me an hour ago! Where’s my fucking money?”

“Yeah, like I’m going to believe you, Rosie,” the clerk said with a smile as the homeless people laughed.

With a roll of his eyes, Noah snatched up one of the sodas and the two bags of chips and rushed out of the main hall. As he walked back down the hallway to his room, he pressed his knuckles to his chest and could feel his adrenaline pumping. He sighed and frowned. He was upset with himself for letting his anger take over instead of behaving with a Christian heart and mind. Was *that* why he saw the creature? Because it was God’s way of warning him not to react with violence?

Dropping his hand down to his side and rolling his eyes, he knew that God would be furious with him for reacting with his head and not his heart, his *Christian* heart. As Noah turned down another corner of the hallway, he felt a hand grab his arm. Still in defense mode, Noah spun around on his heels and saw a nicely dressed man standing in front of him with a soda in his hand.

“Hey, relax,” the man said, “I just wanted to give you the soda you left back there on the table.”

Noah sighed with a shake of his head.

“Oh, thanks, sorry,” Noah said as he took the soda from the man.

"My name's Emmanuel. What's yours?"

"I'm Noah Hunter."

"Wow, I detect a southern accent, so you *can't* be from Virginia," Emmanuel said with a half-smile, "more like—South Carolina or Texas somewhere, am I right?"

Noah snickered.

"Texas. I got my accent from my father. He was born and raised in Texas, and I was raised there too until I was seven and moved here."

"Cool," Emmanuel said with a brief smile and a nod as he walked down the hall with Noah, "Look, don't mind Nicky back there. He's not—all the way sane. He's an Iraq veteran, still thinking he's at war all the damn time. This whole shelter is crazy. Tonight is surprisingly tame because usually, this place is *really* crazy."

"How do you deal with it?" Noah asked.

"I keep to myself, and I get whatever I need as far as food is concerned before I come in here for the night."

"How long have you been homeless?" Noah asked.

Emmanuel sighed with a shake of his head.

"Four long months, it's been rough too. My wife and son are at the mother and child shelter over on Princess Anne Street in Fredericksburg, and I'm—*here*."

Noah's eyes widened.

"God, *Fredericksburg*? That's quite a ways from here. How do you deal with having yourself separated from them?"

"Well, I talk to them every day on the little—government cell phone I have," Emmanuel replied, "and every weekend, I drive to Fredericksburg to see them. It's just that we have to go our separate ways to get into the shelters. You know, I can't remember the last time I've felt happy since *being* homeless. My wife's been so depressed these last few weeks, and my son is just—it's rough. Tonight's my wife's birthday, and I can't even be with her."

“Wow, yeah,” Noah replied. “I *know* it’s tough. My wife died a little while back, and I still miss her like crazy.”

“Man, I’m sorry, *damn*,” Emmanuel said with a frown. “It seems like things are just getting worse for *everyone* these days.”

“Yeah, I know, but you know, what helps me is prayer,” Noah replied, “In fact, I can pray with you if you’d like.”

Noah’s eyes widened as he glanced over at Emmanuel. Oh no, there was that look again, the look that Noah saw countless times from Christopher and once from his daughter, the look that was as if Noah were insane.

“Um, no—that’s okay—but thanks,” Emmanuel said while backing away from Noah.

“Oh,” Noah replied with a look of disappointment, “well, why—”

“Look, I have to get back to my room, but it was nice meeting you,” Emmanuel interrupted before turning and walking away.

Instantly, Noah sucked his teeth, closed his eyes for a second, and looked away, feeling heat rush through him, but *why*? He didn’t have anything to feel bad or embarrassed about, not regarding him trying to share the gift of prayer to Christ with another person. So, if he had nothing to be embarrassed about, why did he *feel* embarrassed? Walking back into the room, he saw Hazel asleep in the bed. As he placed the chips and sodas on the nightstand table by the bed, he pulled up the covers over her and crept into the bathroom in the room, closing the door behind him. He paced back and forth with a frown and with his fist covering his mouth.

The incident inside the main hall kept replaying in his mind, and with each replay, he felt a throbbing pain in his head. The feeling of guilt grew stronger and stronger until Noah dropped down on the edge of the bathtub, leaned his head down into the palms of his hands, and massaged his head. He sinned inside that main hall, reacting with violence instead of with love like his Lord and Savior had taught him to

do in the Bible. No wonder Emmanuel didn't want him praying with him. Who would with Noah acting in a way that was so contrary to the ways of a Bible-believing Christian? Noah loudly sighed as he lowered his gaze to the floor and displayed a sad frown. The more he allowed guilt to marinate within him, the worse he felt. At that moment, he did the only thing he felt was right.

"God, I sinned, and I'm sorry," Noah said, "I shouldn't have hit that man, I know that, and I'm sorry. I just didn't know what else to do, but please forgive me, God. Please."

Unbeknownst to Noah, the black, monstrous, tick-like creature that had visited him before had once again returned, and despite Noah not being able to hear it, out of its mouth bellowed a loud, vibrating wail, representing the fact that at that moment, it was feeding off Noah's energy.

CHAPTER EIGHT

For days, August had found himself ensnared in the silence that followed his last attempt to reach out to Noah. The intervening time, crammed with meetings with his literary agent and publisher, as well as working at his rehab center and shelter, did little to distract him from thoughts of Noah and Jack. That's why August bypassed his usual routines upon returning home that evening and sank heavily onto the living room sofa. Normally, he would shed the day's attire for comfort, indulge in a shower, prepare a meal, and then surrender to the realms of astral projection. But not that evening. No, that evening, his spirit longed for a journey to *The Summerland* to seek out Jack again.

However, just as he was about to recline and embark on his spiritual voyage, an unbidden sneeze burst forth, quickly followed by another, then a relentless succession. He reached for the tissue box perched on a nearby side table, attempting to alleviate his suddenly congested nose, only to find it stubbornly resistant to relief. Throughout the day, he had tried to brush aside the mounting discomfort—a head throbbing with pain, a stuffy nose that made it hard to breathe, and a throat ablaze with a fiery itch—all telltale signs of an encroaching bout of sinusitis. Yet, in that moment, the discomfort became undeniable. His contemplations were interrupted by the shrill ring of his phone, punctuated by yet another sneeze.

“Hello?” August answered the phone in a nasally voice.

“August, it's Mother,” Victoria said on the other end of the line.

“You're sick, and so I'm coming over with soup.”

August frowned for a few seconds, then rolled his eyes and

sighed. His mother had a gift; she had it since birth, and it was the gift of being a telepathic empath. However, she always declared it a gift of discernment from God.

“Mom, no, I’m fine, really, it’s just sinusitis. There’s no need to come over—”

“Don’t lie to me, August. You’re not fine. Sinusitis *means* you’re sick, so I’m *coming over*. Now, which soup do you want? Chicken noodle or tomato? In fact, you know what? I’ll bring over both *and* bring you your Professor Ollie stuffed teddy bear. Remember him, August? Oh, I remember you used to love that little bear—”

“Mom, Mom—hold on, how about this? How about the *don’t* come over because I’m not six years old, I’m a grown man who can take care of *myself* soup?” August replied before snickering, rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

“Well! August Cameron, are you getting *smart* with me?”

Shutting his eyes tight, August bit down hard on his lower lip before sneezing again.

“No, I’m not. Forgive me, but look, I’m *fine*. I’ll *be* fine, I really will.”

“You promise, honey bunny?”

August rolled his eyes with a brief smile and a shake of his head.

“Yes, I promise. I’ll be completely fine. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“All right, but you call me *before* then if you need me, okay?”

“I will, but—wait, hold on, Mom—do you really still have Professor Ollie? I mean, after all these years?” August asked in a voice momentarily peeling back the layers of his grown-up persona, revealing a flicker of the child he once was.

“Well, of course, honey bunny!” Victoria exclaimed. “He was always your favorite growing up, which is why I offered to bring him to you. I wanted to come today, but you—”

“All right, how about you come over tomorrow then, okay?”

August cut in with a faint smile.

“Okay, Professor Ollie and I will be over at noon, and I’ll bring you my homemade tomato soup anyway.”

August laughed.

“Great, and—Mom? Thank you, I love you.”

“Oh, I love you too, honey bunny,” Victoria said softly, resulting in August silently laughing before ending the call.

After sneezing not once, not twice, but three times, August sighed with frustration before lying down on the sofa and closing his eyes. Within minutes of laying perfectly still, August found himself drifting into astral projection. As soon as his ethereal IS-BE soul lifted out of his body, he immediately mentally projected himself to The Summerland. Within seconds, he was there, standing in the middle of the city, just like before. However, all the sinusitis symptoms he felt just before beginning astral projection were nonexistent, as if he had never had them at all. That was something new to him. Looking all around with widened eyes, he searched for Jack but found him nowhere.

“Come on, Jack, where are you?” August said in a low voice.

As August turned to his left, he saw Jack walking up the stairs of a four-story, brownstone apartment building.

“Jack!” August shouted out while walking with pace over to Jack.

As Jack stopped at the top of the stairs, he turned and saw August. Jack’s eyes brightened, and a hopeful light flashed across his face—hope that August did not share.

“August,” Jack said, descending the steps.

Jack stopped in front of him and frowned with a brow raised.

“You look beat,” Jack said, “is everything all right?”

The endearment surprised August, resulting in August briefly raising a brow.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” August responded, “it’s just sinusitis symptoms back in the body, for some reason, they’re affecting my visual

appearance here in the astral.”

Jack’s gaze lingered, assessing.

“Even so, you look like somebody wrung you out. You sleeping at all?”

“Enough,” August answered with his half-smile.

Jack didn’t buy it. He nodded with a faint frown.

“Well, we’ll circle back to that. Did you reach Noah yet? Any luck?”

August’s smile folded inward. He exhaled hard and glanced past Jack to a cracked bit of sidewalk.

“I tried—more than once, but he’s just too locked in. The moment he heard that I’m a Maltheist and where you are, he said he’d call the cops if I didn’t leave him alone.”

Jack rolled his eyes, a rueful ghost of a smile flickering. Then the smile withered.

“Stubborn as a mule. Got it straight from me.”

“I don’t think we’re going to reach him,” August said, his throat tight with regret. “I apologize, Jack. I tried; I really did.”

Jack’s brow furrowed.

“Yeah, that’s my fault, August. I ground religion into him like it may have been coffee beans, and he was a goddamn—*coffee grinder*, from the time he was two years old up to the day before I was on my goddamn deathbed. I made him eat, sleep, and *breathe* Jesus. Now, he’s bound to it.”

Jack shook his head.

“But we can’t give up, August,” Jack continued. “You just have to put pressure on him. That’s what worked with *me*. I wasn’t born a Christian. I got into it when I was fourteen because my mama and my old man kept *pressuring* me to seek the lord, and yeah, I was rebellious at first; I was—so stubborn. I only wanted to do what I wanted to do, just like Noah, but they kept right on pressuring me, and they made it

convincing enough that I finally caved in. Now, I *know* if you keep pressuring Noah, he'll eventually cave in too. August, *please*, you have to do this."

August sighed with a brief close of his eyes.

"Jack, I—I just don't know, I mean, seriously," August replied as he rubbed the bridge of his nose—the movement reminding him of the headache waiting back in his physical body.

Jack studied him again, then spoke more softly.

"Well, before we map out a plan, answer me this: when was the last time you rested—and I mean, *really* rested?"

August frowned.

"I...I rest whenever I can—"

"No," Jack cut in, his tone leaving no space for debate, "you need to rest *as soon as possible*, and I'm not asking you, I'm *telling* you, August. Your spirit's only as strong as the body it's tethered to, and right now you look like you could keel over. So, promise me you'll take the night off before you try to reach out to Noah again."

The unexpected tenderness in the order—equal parts concern and authority—made August hesitate for a moment.

"All right," August said quietly with a brief, faint smile. "I promise."

"Good," Jack replied with a faint frown and a nod.

"How did they get you to come here in the first place, Jack?" August asked. "I mean, I'm sure they showed you angels and stuff with you being religious; you followed into the white light, but how did they get you to come—*here*?"

Jack sighed and looked down and away with briefly pursed lips as his entire facial expression changed. A deep frown appeared on his forehead, and his face turned light red before he shook his head.

"I—I don't want to talk about it," Jack said in a low voice, "not right now, sorry."

August frowned, trying to decipher Jack's words for some

meaning that Jack was trying to hide, but he couldn't.

"Was it that bad?" August asked. "Was—"

August stopped as Jack shook his head quickly.

"No, it wasn't that it was bad. It's just that—I'm *ashamed* that I let myself fall for everything that led me here."

As more tears clouded Jack's eyes, Jack turned his back to August.

"I'm—I'm sorry, I gotta get inside," Jack said in a low tone that August could've sworn was cracking with emotion. "But remember what I said—rest first and then try again with Noah."

Before August could say another word to Jack, Jack nodded with a faint concerned smile and then rushed up the stairs, hurried inside, and slammed the apartment building door behind him. Letting out an exhaling breath as he walked down the steps and walked away from the apartment building, August closed his eyes and frowned at the thought of attempting another conversation with Noah. He had no idea what he could say differently to try to convince Noah to change his ways of thinking. However, he had to think of something for Jack's sake.

As Jack walked into the kitchen of his apartment, he sat down at the table and rested his face in his hands, covering his face completely with them. Closing his eyes, in his mind, he could still see the events that led him to The Summerland as if they had been carried out just the day before—

As Jack and Joanna walked through the tunnel of white light, Jack stared with widened eyes at the beautiful merging and then changing of bright, colorful lights that lined the tunnel's ceiling, walls, and floor. With every step he took, he felt a cozy, comforting warmth, as if he were wrapped in

a soft, snug electric blanket. His eyes were glued to the lights of the tunnel until he saw him—Jesus—a six-feet-two, athletically built man with dark brown, wavy hair that came to his shoulders, a neatly trimmed beard, bright, hazel eyes, and Mediterranean, olive skin. As Jesus stood in a sparkling white robe that flowed down to the floor, a bright golden glow surrounded his entire body. With his arms folded across his chest, Jesus smiled as Jack approached him.

“Jack, you’re here,” Jesus said in a slightly high-pitched voice. “I’ve been waiting for you for a *while* now.”

Jack stared at Jesus, blinking several times, trying to compute who he was actually seeing before his eyes.

“I—I can’t believe it’s you,” Jack said in a low, breathy tone. “I’m—so, so honored to meet you.”

Jesus let out a creepy, hollow laugh.

“Yeah, I know, everyone always is,” Jesus said while smiling, “are you ready for your life review?”

Jack’s smile faded. He tilted his head to the side and squinted his eyes with a brow raised.

“Life review?”

“Yes,” Jesus responded with a nod, “it’s essential that every soul has one. Take a look.”

Instantly, the tunnel’s walls, ceiling, and floors were filled with clear, color video clips of numerous happy times in Jack’s life, from his birth to his teenage years to his adult years. Among hundreds of video clips that played within the tunnel were clips of Jack playing ball with his father in the backyard of his home in Quebec as a teen, clips of him decorating a Christmas tree with his family, clips of him graduating from high school as his family cheered in the audience, clips of him marrying Joanna, clips of him being by Joanna’s side as she held Noah, right after giving birth to him, clips of Jack playing baseball with Noah in the backyard of their home. As Jack stared at the clips, he exhaled a loud,

sharp breath with widened eyes and a brief smile.

“Wow,” Jack said, “this is *amazing*! This is my entire *life*!”

“I *know*!” Jesus said before laughing.

Within seconds, Jesus’ face displayed a serious frown.

“However, Jack, take a look at this.”

Instantly, all the clips on the walls, ceiling, and floors of the tunnel switched over to different clips of Jack as a teenager, beating up his father all around the kitchen, clips of Jack as a teenager, breaking into and robbing several people’s homes, clips of Jack being arrested numerous times, clips of Jack raping one young girl in a college dorm, clips of Jack shooting and killing a man in an alley as a young adult, clips of Jack beating Noah with a thick, black extension cord as Noah screamed and cried to the top of his lungs. All the clips displayed horrible things that Jack had never even done, yet in every clip, there Jack was.

“What—what is this?” Jack asked in a light tone while shaking his head slightly with a frown and briefly squinted eyes.

“These are *all* the bad things you’ve done in your life, Jack,” Jesus responded before shaking his head, “and boy, have you done some *bad* things.”

Unbeknown to Jack, as Jack stood there beside Jesus and his angels, Jack was being telepathically, mentally programmed, and brainwashed by Jesus to believe that he had actually lived through every horrible life moment he was seeing in those clips.

“Good god, this is *horrible*,” Jack said in a low voice with tearful eyes. “I was horrible.”

“You were indeed, Jack,” Jesus said while briefly pouting his lips and frowning before displaying a smirk. “All the bad things you did greatly outweigh your happy moments, and because of that, you’ve incurred quite a lot of karmic *debt*, Jack.”

“Oh—Oh Jesus, I’m *sorry*,” Jack said tearfully while turning to face

Jesus, "I'm sorry, please, you have to forgive me, I'm sorry, I am—"

"Shh, shh, shh, it's *okay*, Jack," Jesus said with an amused smile while walking closer to Jack and holding Jack's hands. "Listen carefully though; I need you to understand something, okay? With how you lived your life, Jack, you have absolutely *no* chance of getting into heaven at all."

With a deep frown, Jack exhaled while turning away from Jesus as tears streamed.

"No," Jack said tearfully, "no, no, please you—you *gotta* give me a second chance! I—I can't even—believe I *did* all these things you're showing me—"

"But you *did* do them, Jack!" Jesus shouted sharply, with his smile disappearing, a frown appearing on his face, and his hazel eyes turning as black as marbles for a few seconds.

"I know," Jack said while wiping streaming tears away, "I know, I guess I'm just—I'm just *ashamed* of all that I've done. You're going to—send me to hell, aren't you?"

"You don't have to go there, Jack," Jesus answered almost in a singing tone while smirking with a brow raised. "All you have to do is *agree* to reincarnate; reincarnating back down to Earth will pay off *all* your karmic debt. That's the only way you can keep from going to hell."

Jack instantly glared at Jesus, his eyes wide and hopeful for an opportunity to escape hell.

"Really?" Jack asked, "I'll do it. I will. If it keeps me from going to hell, I'll do it."

Jesus let out a loud, hollow laugh right as Joanna disappeared into thin air, something that Jack took notice of.

"Wait, where's she going?" Jack asked while looking to his left and then all around him. "Where did she go?"

"She—has work to do for me, so she had to go," Jesus replied, "but now back to the matter at hand, so—Jack, what you're saying is that

you *will* agree to reincarnate? Because if so, that means you get a second chance to right *all* the wrongs that you did in the life you just left from. Then and only then can you go to heaven.”

Jack nodded with a frown.

“Yeah, I agree, I’ll do it. If it means that afterward, I’ll get to spend an eternity with you, Joanna, and everyone else who’s gone on to heaven, then yeah, I’ll do it.”

Jesus flashed an evil, mischievous smile.

“Excellent,” Jesus replied, “*thank* you, Jack—”

Opening his eyes, Jack rolled his eyes, which were clouded with tears. He bit down hard on his lower lip and balled up his fists, not wanting his mind to remember any more of how he arrived at The Summerland. It was a memory that was too painful, one which made Jack enraged every time he thought of it. He was specifically enraged at himself for even falling for the trick that led him to The Summerland in the first place.

At around eleven that night at the shelter, as Hazel lay in the bed asleep, Noah was trying his best to sleep as well but instead found himself tossing and turning several times. He couldn’t sleep due to the loud talking and laughter he heard outside their room. No matter how much he tried to block out the sounds, including by covering his head with his pillow, he couldn’t. The noise seemed to reverberate throughout the walls of the room. After he lay on his back for a few seconds with a frown, Hazel moaned and turned over to face Noah.

“Daddy, what’s all that noise out there?”

“It’s people out there, that’s all.”

“Can you make them stop? They’re too noisy.”

Noah sighed with a roll of his eyes.

“Okay, stay here, honey. I’ll be right back.”

Noah got out of bed and walked out of the room. Not too far from the door of his room were young guys and girls standing in the middle of the hallway. Before walking over, he braced himself by exhaling with a brief close of his eyes.

“Hey, um, I have an eight-year-old in that room back there trying to sleep. Do you all think you could just keep the noise down a little bit?”

“Oh damn, we sorry!” one of the girls said with a laugh. “We’ll be quiet for your little one and shit.”

“What’s her name, honey?” another girl asked as she walked over and wrapped her arm around Noah’s shoulder. “Ooh, and you are too damn fine! You got a woman, baby?”

“My *daughter’s* name is Hazel,” Noah replied, taking the girl’s arm off him, “anyway, thanks. I really appreciate it.”

“Sorry, Hazel!” one of the guys yelled out, which resulted in the group of guys and girls bursting into laughter.

As soon as Noah walked back into the room and closed the door, he heard the loud talking and laughter from the group of guys and girls continuing once again. Sighing, he rolled his eyes and clenched his jaw. *Jeez, didn’t anyone have a heart at all?* No, of course not. Not everyone had the Christian kindness and love that Noah had. Walking back over to the bed, he dropped down on it with a dejected frown and slumped shoulders. He could feel Hazel tugging on the back of his shirt.

“Yeah, honey?”

“They’re still making noise, Daddy.”

Noah sighed again as he lay down in bed and turned to face her.

“I know. Just try to ignore it and try to get as much sleep as you can, okay?”

“Okay. I miss Mommy.”

Noah stared at her with a sympathetic, emotional frown.

“I know you do, sweetheart. I do too, but as long as we always

keep her in our hearts and our memory, she'll always be with us."

"Does that include keeping what she always told me about the white light in *my* heart and memory too?"

Noah raised an eyebrow and displayed a confused frown.

"The white light? What did she tell you about the white light?"

"Mommy used to always tell me that when I get older, when it comes time for me to die, never go through the white light that I'll see because the white light will take me to the bad place."

Noah's eyes widened at hearing this. Deep within his soul, he knew that wasn't true; at least, he *felt* it wasn't true. His father and his fellow church family always told him that entering the white light would take one directly to heaven.

"Should I keep that in my heart and memory, too, Daddy?"

Noah stared at Hazel with a frown. He wasn't sure at that moment how to come out of the shock of what he had just heard so that he could answer her question.

"Let's talk about this sometime tomorrow," Noah said while shaking his head, "right now, try your best to get some sleep, okay?"

"Okay," Hazel replied before turning over with her back to him.

As Noah's eyes stayed on her, his mind kept repeating the information Hazel just told him. *The white light takes you to the bad place; the white light takes you to the bad place; the white light takes you to the bad place.* That couldn't have been true. No, there was no way it was true. The white light led to God and heaven and God and heaven only. He was sure of it.



On a stereo nearby, as "Wishing On A Star" by Rose Royce played, a theme that Leah always loved so much, Noah watched with a smile as Leah stood in front of the dresser mirror in the bedroom she shared with him. He watched as she stared at her reflection, carefully observing

her smooth, golden-brown skin, bright, chestnut-colored eyes, and shoulder-length brown hair. She looked like an angel in an all-white, flowing gown. Walking over to her from behind, Noah wrapped his arms around her and kissed her neck. She giggled, turned around, wrapped her arms around him, and they shared a kiss that was soft at first before he deepened the kiss even more. The memory switched to Noah and Leah lying in bed together with him continuing to kiss her, him caressing her, loving every inch of her, both of them feeling the intense euphoria of intimacy. The experience was followed by Leah lying in Noah's arms, holding his hand and kissing it.

"I love you, Noah. I always will."

"I love you too. I always have."

At that moment, a bright, white light filled the room, almost blinding Noah. Noah heard Leah scream and then—



With a loud gasp, Noah shot up in bed, out of breath and with his eyes filled with tears. He pounded his fists down hard on the bed with upset. *God*, he didn't want to wake up. The moment he was in with Leah felt so *good*, so *real*—but it *wasn't*. It was just a dream, a dream that would never materialize into truth again while he was alive. Hearing the sound of someone ruffling through bags, Noah shot his eyes over to the opposite corner of the room where the sound was coming from, but all he saw was darkness. As Noah turned on the light above the bed, he saw a dirty-faced, homeless man with long, gray hair shuffling through his and Hazel's belongings.

"Hey!" Noah shouted. "What are you doing?"

As Noah jumped off the bed and ran over to where the homeless man was, the homeless man ran towards the door of the room with his hands filled with Noah's clothes. As the homeless man rushed out, Noah

ran out after him. The homeless man ran down the hallway, and Noah ran after him, caught up to him, and grabbed his arm. Instantly, the homeless man dropped the clothes, spun around with a switchblade in his hand, and swiped it towards Noah's abdomen, but like a pro, Noah jumped back in time. Noah pushed the homeless man hard up against the wall behind him, making the homeless man drop his switchblade to the floor.

With quick speed, as the homeless man tried to throw a punch at Noah, once again, like a pro, Noah ducked and missed the punch. Noah then shot back up and cold-cocked the homeless man across the face hard, knocking him unconscious. Unlike earlier, Noah didn't feel guilty this time because, in his mind, *this* fight was in absolute defense. As Noah backed away, he picked up his clothes off the floor and angrily walked away.

The low, pulsing beat of the *Magnum P.I.* theme song filled the living room. Thomas Sullivan *Magnum IV*—mustachioed, confident, and utterly '80s—was on the screen during the opening credits. August, tucked under a heavy fleece blanket on the sofa, shifted, pulling the edge of the blanket closer to his chest. The sinus headache was still a throbbing, relentless drum, and every so often, a tickle in his throat led to a cough that rattled his chest. The sound of a key sliding into the front door lock took August's attention away from *Magnum's* opening credits. The deadbolt clicked open, the latch released, and the front door swung inward.

Victoria Cameron, impeccably dressed even for a home visit, walked in as if she owned the place. She carried a large shoulder bag and, precariously balanced in her hands, was a steaming bowl of rich, red tomato soup. Victoria spotted him immediately and smiled a knowing, maternal smile. August broke into a weak, relieved, and entirely

genuine laugh.

“Well, look who finally showed up. Noon, you said. It’s barely a quarter past. Honestly, Mother, that’s not exactly the famously punctual Cameron standard of excellence, is it?”

Victoria navigated around a coffee table, setting the soup bowl down gently on the nearest end table.

“Hello to you too, August. And darling, I was held up. Do you have any idea what it takes to get from Sterling to Chesterfield in a reliable amount of time? It’s practically an odyssey!”

She leaned in and tapped his blanket with a perfectly manicured finger.

“Now, are you going to argue with the woman who braved the I-95 corridor for you?”

He laughed before displaying a genuine smile.

“Never. Not when she’s carrying food,” he conceded, allowing his head to sink back into the pillow.

Victoria placed her hand firmly on her hip, her expression shifting from humorous to serious-mother-mode.

“Up, up, up. You look like a poorly wrapped holiday gift on this sofa. I need you to go upstairs and get into your actual bed. You can’t properly rest down here.”

“Mom, come on. I’m comfortable. I’ve got Magnum on tv, I can recuperate just fine right here,” August protested, waving a weak hand toward the television. “What’s the worst that can happen with me staying here?”

“The worst that can happen is that your ‘sinusitis’ turns into a full-blown chest infection, and then I have to drag you to the emergency room myself,” she countered, her voice soft but firm. She gave him a look—the one that had successfully stopped his youthful antics countless times.

“Now, get up and go to bed. Now.”

August sighed, knowing he was defeated. His body felt heavy, and the idea of sinking into his actual mattress was suddenly incredibly appealing.

"Fine. But only because you brought your homemade three ingredient tomato soup," he responded good-naturedly as he slowly pushed himself up.

Victoria waited until he was standing, then grabbed her shoulder bag. She followed him up the stairs, offering a supportive arm when he stumbled slightly. When they reached his bedroom, she waited as he slid under the duvet on his bed.

"There, see? Isn't that much better?" Victoria asked, smoothing the blanket over his chest.

"Actually, yeah it is," August replied as he grabbed the remote off the nightstand table beside him.

Sitting down beside him on the bed, she reached into her bag, pulling out something soft and brown. It was Professor Ollie, his stuffed teddy bear, looking slightly threadbare in the muzzle and a little squashed from the journey. A slow, unexpected smile spread across August's face. The smile wasn't the charismatic, self-assured smile he wore every day; it was softer, a curve of pure, unguarded delight. He reached out and took the bear.

"Aww, you brought Professor Ollie! I thought you would forget," August said, his voice dropping an octave, a hint of the six-year-old boy he'd been when he first got the bear. He hugged the worn fabric for a moment before placing him on the pillow next to him.

"Forget Professor Ollie?" Victoria asked with a brow raised. "No, I'd never. He's all a part of your back-to-good-health package. He got you through your first day of first grade, remember? And that awful stomach flu when you were seven. And when your goldfish died and you cried for three days straight. And that time—"

"Okay, okay," August laughed, "I get it. Professor Ollie's been

through the trenches with me.”

She leaned over and gently placed the palm of her hand against his forehead. Her brow furrowed slightly.

“Oh, honey bunny, you're warm.”

“It's barely anything,” August said, though he leaned into her touch without realizing it. “Just the sinuses being dramatic.”

“Well, dramatic or not, I'm going downstairs to heat up that soup and mix up my special remedy,” Victoria said, standing to her feet. “The one with honey, lemon and apple cider vinegar. You rest right here and watch *Magnum*, and I'll be back in a jiffy.”

“Okay, Mom. Thank you,” August whispered before sneezing loudly.

Victoria kissed him on the forehead, her gaze full of warmth and concern, before turning and quietly leaving the room.

The following day, Noah awakened to Hazel shaking his shoulder.

“Hey, honey,” Noah said as he sat up in bed, “how long have you been awake?”

“I don't know, a few minutes. Daddy, what's wrong with your phone?”

“What do you mean?”

“Some of the games aren't working. The internet isn't working either.”

“Let me see.”

Noah took the phone from her, dialed a number, and heard his phone ring twice.

“Your services have been interrupted,” a male voice said on the other end of the line, “to restore your services, please pay—”

Noah ended the call with a sigh and a roll of his eyes.

“Great.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing; it’s nothing. Hey, how about after I wash out your clothes for school on Monday and we get our teeth brushed and get all cleaned up, we go get some breakfast?”

“That sounds great!”

Minutes later, as Noah stood in the bathroom shower of their room, he closed his eyes and reveled in the hot water that rained down on him. It felt refreshing. Noah hadn’t washed or showered in days, which was *not* like him at all. He was always one to maintain an *extremely* high standard of personal hygiene, but their issue of homelessness had hindered him. After Hazel and Noah got clean, they both left their room and walked to the main hall. Inside, numerous homeless men and women sat at benches, eating breakfast and watching television.

With a brief close of his eyes, Noah sighed a breath of relief, thankful that the hall was quiet and calm. He took that to mean that the rowdy bunch from the previous night were all in their rooms, sleeping off their raunchy energy. Noah and Hazel walked over to a table where numerous breakfast sandwiches and a jug of orange juice sat on a tray. He picked up a plastic-wrapped ham and cheese sandwich and looked at it. The sandwich bread had fuzzy, green mold all around it and a strong, musty aroma that made its way to Noah’s nose.

“Eww,” Hazel said with a sour face.

“Eww is right, this looks horrible,” Noah replied.

“Daddy, I don’t want that.”

“Neither do I, hold on.”

Noah picked up another sandwich that was also molded all around. In fact, each sandwich he picked up had mold either all around the bread or on some parts of the bread. He sighed and shook his head as he threw down the seventh moldy sandwich in his hand.

"Come on, Hazel," Noah said before walking out of the hall with her.

Noah and Hazel walked over to the lobby desk and saw a female Hispanic clerk who looked to be in her early thirties, sitting behind the desk, watching a portable TV.

"Um, excuse me, the breakfast you're serving in the main hall," Noah said, "it's molded, you know that, right? No one can eat that."

The Hispanic clerk dropped her portable TV on the desk and stared at Noah with an annoyed frown.

"Sir, the breakfast we have in there is what we have. If you don't want it, you're free to get something else elsewhere—"

"What? That's not the point. The lady from last night said you all serve breakfast here, but the breakfast you serve is molded sandwiches that will make anyone sick—"

"Well then, don't *eat* it. You're lucky we serve breakfast at all. I mean, *damn*, this ain't Denny's. Now—"

The Hispanic clerk stopped, snapped her fingers, and motioned for Noah to go away before she returned to looking at her TV. Noah raised an eyebrow while staring at her. The nastiness of this lady aggravated him; however, being the tolerant Christian that he was, he walked with Hazel away from the desk. Noah and Hazel walked back into the main hall and over to the table with the sandwiches and orange juice. He yanked up the jug of orange juice.

"Let's hope the orange juice is okay."

Taking a whiff of the orange juice, it smelled almost as bad as the molded sandwiches, which wasn't of any surprise to Noah at that point.

"Ugh, this is ridiculous," Noah said.

"Great, what are we going to eat now, Daddy?"

Noah reached into his back pocket and pulled out two quarters; that was all the money he had left. He sighed, looked up, and looked around the hall, scanning every corner with his eyes.

"Come on, Hazel."

Walking back to the Hispanic clerk behind the lobby desk, she sighed as she saw Noah approaching her.

"Um, excuse me, I—"

"What!" the Hispanic clerk snapped.

What in the world was this woman's problem?

"Wow, you know, can you at least try not to have a rude PMS attitude? Or do they not pay you enough for that?"

As the Hispanic clerk stared at him with a raised brow, he gave her the same look back. He was not about to back down to this lady, not when he knew he had no reason to.

"Yes—sir, how may I help you?"

"I was wondering if you knew of a guy named Emmanuel. Is he still here, or did he leave? I know he was here last night—"

Noah stopped as the Hispanic clerk held up her hand for him to wait as she looked through papers on a clipboard.

"Nope, the only Emmanuel I see on here signed out this morning."

Noah sighed with a frown of despair.

"Okay, thanks."

When Noah and Hazel walked back into their room, Hazel climbed on the bed while Noah paced the floor. With his eyes glued to the floor and the muscles between his brows flexing, he was trying to think up something, *anything* he could do to get food for himself and Hazel. With the shelter serving molded breakfast, he was sure dinner would be the same, if not worse.

"Daddy, I'm hungry. I'm sorry, but I am."

"No, don't be sorry, sweetie."

Noah walked over and stooped down in front of her.

"Okay, look, I'm going to—try an idea I have. I'm going to go out and try and see if I can get us something to eat—somehow, and I want

you to stay here—”

“Stay *here*? By myself?”

“Yeah, stay in this room, *don’t* go out of this room for *anything*. I want you to stay on this bed and just—try to stay as quiet as possible. I shouldn’t be gone long.”

“But why can’t I come with you?”

“Because the car is low on gas, so I can’t drive, so I’m going to have to go where I’m going on foot, and it’s a long walk away from here, too far for you to walk with me. So—sweetie, *please*; I need you to work with me here. Just stay here on this bed. *Don’t* move, and *don’t* leave this room for *anything*, and I *promise* I’ll be back as soon as I possibly can, okay?”

“Okay, Daddy, I’ll do my part by staying quiet and staying put.”

With a brief close of his eyes, Noah sighed with relief, thankful that he had such an obedient daughter. After hugging Hazel, Noah put on his jacket, kissed Hazel on the forehead, and turned to walk out. As Noah walked down the hallway and out the shelter’s front door, he walked with pace, knowing he couldn’t come back into that building empty-handed. It would be fine if it were just him, but he couldn’t do that to Hazel. She didn’t deserve to go hungry, and as her father, Noah would make *sure* that she *didn’t* go hungry—regardless of what it took.

CHAPTER NINE

Hours later, the bedroom had taken on that warm, amber quality of late afternoon light filtering through half-drawn curtains. August lay propped against his pillows, Professor Ollie tucked beside him, while Victoria sat beside him on top of the covers, her shoes kicked off, and her legs crossed at the ankles. The mug of her homemade remedy that she called “the feel better elixir”—still warm and smelling of honey, lemon, and mysterious maternal magic—rested in August’s hands as the familiar theme song of *Friends* played from the television mounted on his wall. August groaned with a raised brow and a frown.

“Mom, seriously? You know I *hate* this show.”

“Oh, hush,” Victoria said, waving her hand dismissively without taking her eyes off the screen. “It’s a classic.”

“It’s terrible,” August said, taking another reluctant sip of the elixir. His sinuses were already starting to clear, though he’d never admit it. “It’s one of the fakest shows ever created.”

Victoria turned to him with an expression of mock offense.

“Fake? August Cameron, you take that back.”

“Nope, because it’s true, mom,” he replied, warming to his subject despite his stuffed nose. “First of all, *no one* in New York has an apartment *that* big unless they’re making six figures. Rachel works at a coffee shop and lives in a *two*-bedroom in *Manhattan*? Please.”

“It’s television, honey bunny. It’s not a documentary.”

“And don’t even get me started on how they’re *always* at that coffee shop,” August continued, gesturing with his free hand.

“Like—don’t these people have *jobs*? *Lives*? How does Chandler afford to

just sit around making jokes all day?"

Victoria laughed, reaching over to pat his knee.

"August, I swear, you're thinking too hard about this."

"No, no, I'm just getting started," August said, his eyes brightening despite his sickness, "and you want to know the *real* crime? The show is basically just a rip-off of *Living Single*. That show came first, had better writing, better characters, and was *actually* funny."

"Oh, here we go," Victoria said, but she was smiling.

"I'm serious!" August said with a faint humorous smile while sitting up straighter. "Khadijah, Synclaire, Max, Regine, Overton and Kyle? Now *those* were real characters with real problems and real chemistry. They actually *felt* like friends."

"August—"

"And the humor was smarter. It was sharper. It dealt with actual issues that people cared about—careers, relationships, identity, all while being hilarious. Meanwhile, Ross is whining about being on a break with Rachel for the *millionth* time—"

"Hey! Ross and Rachel are iconic!" Victoria protested, laughing.

"Iconic? More like *toxic*," August shot back. "You know what was iconic? When Overton proposed to Synclaire, or when Max and Kyle first slept together. Now *that* was television, not this will-they-won't-they nonsense that drags on for ten seasons. Hell, even *The Parkers* was a better show than *Friends*—minus Professor Oglevee. I couldn't stand that guy."

Victoria was laughing so hard now that tears formed at the corners of her eyes.

"Wow, you are just—so dramatic when you're sick, August, I swear."

"I'm dramatic when I'm *right*," August corrected while smiling and taking another sip of his elixir with exaggerated dignity. "*Living Single* was one hundred times better than *Friends*, and that's not an

opinion, that's a fact."

"Well, if it's such a fact, then why is *Friends* the one that's a global phenomenon?" Victoria challenged, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

August stared at her with a brow raised and a half smile.

"Oh come on," August replied, "I think you and I *both* know the answer to that, *okay?*"

August shaking his head while letting out a short, breathy laugh made Victoria laugh, the kind that shook her whole body and made August grin despite himself. When she finally caught her breath, she reached over and tapped the mug in his hands.

"All right, Mr. Television Critic, how about you just drink your elixir and let it work its magic so you can feel better? Then you can write a strongly worded letter to the television network about their syndication programming choices."

August laughed, which turned into a small cough, before he took another long sip of his elixir.

"Fine, fine. But for the record, I'm only drinking this because it tastes good, *not* because you told me to."

Victoria laughed.

"Of course, honey bunny. Whatever you say."

They fell into a comfortable silence as the show continued; the laugh track punctuating jokes that August steadfastly refused to find funny. He took one more sip of the elixir, then set the mug down on the nightstand with careful precision. The warmth of the drink spread through his chest, mixing with the warmth of simply being there, in that moment, with his mother beside him.

Without thinking, he shifted down slightly and rested his head on her shoulder, just as he'd done countless times as a child. Victoria didn't comment, didn't make it into something more than it was—she simply adjusted her position slightly to make him more comfortable and

continued watching her show. After several minutes, Victoria's eyes widened and she gasped as on the television screen, Ross and Rachel were engrossed in a particularly dramatic, confusing argument.

"Oh! August, did you see that look she just gave him? I swear, he's going to mess this up; he always does! That's why I told you—"

Victoria turned her head to share her shock with her son, but her words died in her throat. August was fast asleep. His breathing was soft, and all the grown-up tension smoothed from his face. At that moment, with his hair slightly tousled and his features still youthful, he didn't look like the charismatic, adult man who argued passionately about sitcoms. He looked, purely and simply, like her little boy—the one she used to tuck into bed every night—the one who'd been afraid of thunderstorms and monsters under the bed, the one who'd believed she could fix anything. And maybe she still could. At least for today. She reached over carefully, brushing his brown hair back from his eyes with gentle fingers, and then leaned down and pressed a kiss to his forehead—the same way she'd done a thousand times before, the same way she'd do a thousand times more if she could.

"Sleep well, honey bunny," she whispered, her voice soft as a prayer.

She reached for the remote and turned off the television, letting the silence settle over the room like a blanket. Then, with the practiced care of someone who'd performed that ritual countless times, she eased his head off her shoulder and onto the pillow, adjusting it so his neck wouldn't hurt when he woke up. She got up off the bed and pulled the covers up higher, tucking them around him the way she had when he was six, when he was ten, when he was sixteen and pretended he didn't need it anymore but never stopped her. For a moment longer, she stood at the bedside, just watching him sleep, her hand resting over her heart. Then she turned and walked quietly out of the room, pulling the door almost closed behind her—leaving it open just a crack, the way she

always had when he was little, just in case he needed her.

To Noah, the brief walk seemed to stretch on for hours. Physically, Noah was in a state of acute discomfort bordering on agony. The relentless walking had taken its toll on his body, particularly his feet, which bore the brunt of his journey. The burning sensation in the soles of his feet was not just a mild irritation, but a searing pain that seemed to radiate upwards, engulfing his entire body in its fiery grasp. This pain was a tangible manifestation of his physical limits being tested, a reminder of the harsh realities of his trek.

His decision to sit on the ground and massage his feet was not merely a brief respite but a necessary intervention to prevent further damage, illustrating his intense physical strain. As he rested his head in his hands, sighed, and closed his eyes, the thought of giving up and returning to the shelter represented not just a physical retreat but an emotional capitulation to his circumstances. The vision of Hazel popping into his mind, however, served as a powerful emotional anchor, a beacon of hope in the overwhelming darkness of his ordeal. *God, please give me the strength to do this.* Standing to his feet, Noah's physical discomfort manifested as a persistent, throbbing ache that seemed to burrow deep into the muscles and bones of his lower back.

This wasn't a fleeting pain, easily ignored; it was the kind that gnawed at his concentration, a constant reminder of his body's protest. In an instinctive search for relief, he reached up under the back of his jacket and shirt and pressed his fingers into the tender flesh with a firmness born of desperation. For a fleeting moment, the intensity of the pain dulled, offering him a brief respite. But it was a mere tease of relief, evaporating within seconds, resulting in him sighing in frustration and frowning. The pain, unyielding and relentless, seemed to echo with each

step he took, a harsh companion on his journey. Sighing again with a frown, he continued walking.

After several more minutes, he came to a four-way intersection. To the left and right sides of the intersection were blocks and businesses, all in a row. After seconds of deciding, Noah took a right at the intersection and walked for several blocks until he heard sounds familiar to him—gospel music. It was coming from a big, brick church to his right with its yellow double doors open. The sign above the church read, “Bright Light Baptist Church.” Almost as if hypnotized by the gospel music, he walked up the steps of the church and stood in the doorway, watching a black-and-white, sixty-person choir sing, “Jesus Is My Rock,” as hundreds of black-and-white churchgoers stood in the pews, singing, clapping, and dancing along to the gospel music.

“Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide, myself in thee,” the lead singer of the choir sang with the help of the rest of the choir, “you know I get tired, sho’ nuff I get weak. I get worn, oh Lord, but I read in your word, where you feed the little bird, and I tell you Jesus, Jesus is my rock, my rock, my sword, and shield.”

With a smile, Noah closed his eyes and drew in a deep, deliberate breath, soaking in the familiar, comforting melodies that wrapped around him like a warm embrace. With each note and word, Noah felt the Holy Spirit moving within him, a sensation both exhilarating and humbling. The music seemed to work its way into the very core of his being, offering solace and rejuvenation to his weary spirit. As the lyrics intertwined with the rhythm, Noah felt almost overcome by the Holy Spirit's overwhelming presence.

It was an intense, all-consuming sensation that seemed to ignite every fiber of his being with a divine fire. As he stood there, he truly understood what the Bible prophet, Jeremiah, meant when he said that the holy spirit was so *strong* that it felt like fire in the bones, a type of fire that you couldn't hold in. He felt his pulse quicken with a sense of

elation, a profound yearning for the divine connection he found in the harmonies of faith. With the final notes of the gospel fading into the air, Noah released a wistful sigh, craving for more, thirsting for the fortitude and inspiration that only God's praises could provide.

"Excuse me, may I help you?" a voice said from behind Noah.

Noah turned around and saw a black man in his early fifties standing beside him in a gold and black robe.

"Oh well, yeah, I at first was listening to your choir sing. God, how I miss hearing that."

"Ah, well, do you go to church regularly?"

"I did, until..."

"Well, come on, let's talk downstairs so we don't interrupt the service. I'm Reverend Jamal Bennett, the pastor of this church."

"Hi, I'm Noah Hunter."

"Noah, nice to meet you. All right, follow me."

Pastor Jamal took Noah downstairs to an empty banquet hall. However, Noah could still hear organ music playing from upstairs.

"So, Noah, did you know Ida Johnson?"

"Ida Johnson?"

"Yeah, that's her funeral upstairs."

Noah stared at Pastor Jamal with a confused frown before looking away, briefly closing his eyes and shaking his head.

"You were watching a *funeral* upstairs," Pastor Jamal said. "You saw the coffin, right? The funeral was for one of the members of our church—Ida Johnson, and well, let me correct myself; we don't really even call it a funeral. We call it a homegoing."

"Oh God, I'm sorry, the church was so packed that—no, I couldn't even see the coffin. I just—I heard the gospel music, and it moved me to come inside and listen, but—I didn't mean to intrude on the service. Please forgive me—"

"No, it's quite all right. When the spirit moves you, it moves you."

You have to obey the spirit because the spirit is Jesus, amen?"

"Amen, amen, indeed," Noah replied with a smile.

"All right, so, was that the only reason why you came in, Noah? Because if so, I can give you a church program. We have services on Sunday at nine, ten, and eleven."

"Oh—um, I'm already a member of another church, Faith Landmarks Bible Church—"

"Oh yeah, I know Pastor Thomas Owens. I know him quite well."

"Yeah, but since I'm here, I do need help. Um—does your church have a food pantry here?"

"Yeah, we do, but—ooh, sorry, you're not a member here—"

"Well, no, but—"

"Do you live around here? In the immediate area?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Well then, I'm sorry, but we can't help you, *okay*?" Pastor Jamal said with a brief, contrived smile.

Noah gaped at Pastor Jamal with wide eyes as if Pastor Jamal had just spoken in a language that was foreign to him.

"*What*? Just because I'm not a member or because I don't live around here? Look, Pastor, my eight-year-old daughter and I are staying at a shelter not too far from here, and we're *hungry*. The shelter isn't—"

"Look, look, stop, *look*, I'm sorry about your problems, I really am, but if you aren't a member here, we just can't help you—but we'll keep you both in prayer. Now, there's an exit door over that way. Have a wonderful day, all right?"

As Pastor Jamal tightened his grip on Noah's arm and led him forcefully towards a corner exit door, Noah shook his head and pulled away from him.

"Oh my God! Are you *serious*? I'm here asking—not for money, but for *food*, and you're turning me away because of your non-membership, address jurisdiction *rules*? What kind of pastor *are*

you?”

“The kind that looks out for his *tithing* congregation—first.”

“Yeah, but what about—”

“Look! Don’t make me get on the phone and call the police on you, all right? I said we can’t help you. Now *get out!*”

With a heavy heart and a weary shake of his head, Noah scowled at Pastor Jamal. The betrayal felt like a cold, sharp dagger stabbing him directly in the heart. In that moment, the realization that a man of the cloth—a supposed shepherd of God’s flock—could treat one of his own so callously was both shocking and deeply wounding. Disappointment weighed heavily on him as he turned and exited the church. Noah found himself wandering around to the side of the church before stepping back onto the bustling street with his eyes brimming with tears. He stopped as the weight of despair pressed down on his shoulders like a physical burden.

He sighed deeply; his gaze dropped to the ground as a frown carved itself deeper into his features. If even a pastor, a supposed beacon of hope and help, had turned him away, where was he supposed to turn next? The question hung in the air, heavy with hopelessness. Noah had made a promise to himself, a vow that he wouldn’t return to the shelter empty-handed. But standing there, feeling utterly forsaken, he couldn’t see a way forward.

The prospect of breaking that promise loomed large, but it was a specter of failure that he couldn’t bear to face. It seemed insurmountable. Just then, as if the universe itself was responding to his plight, a bus rumbled past him; its side adorned with a poster that caught his tear-glazed eyes. It was an advertisement for August’s rehab and homeless shelter. Time seemed to slow as Noah’s gaze fixated on the poster, particularly the contact number displayed in bold. It was a glimmer of hope, however faint, in the overwhelming darkness of his despair.

“804-366-2166,” Noah read in a low voice.

Just as he was about to delve into his jacket for his cell phone, he paused, a frown creasing his forehead as he closed his eyes and remembered—he had no service. Casting a glance around, he knew he needed to find a store or any establishment willing to allow him to use their phone. His gaze landed on a cell phone store at the corner, and with a surge of hope, he made a beeline for it, pushing the door open with urgency.

Behind the counter stood a young woman in her twenties, her blond hair and blue eyes sparkling under the store’s pink, white, yellow, and blue neon fluorescent lights. She was clad in a vibrant neon pink sweatshirt that was emblazoned with the words “I love the ’80s” on it. It perfectly complemented the Dead Or Alive eighties tune “You Spin Me Round” that was playing from a stereo in the background.

“Hi, welcome to 19th Street Cellular! How can I *totally* help you today?” she greeted with a valspeak dialect.

Approaching the counter, Noah was quick to get to the point.

“Hi,” he started, the urgency clear in his voice, “I’m in a bind here. My phone’s out of service, and I desperately need to make an emergency call. Could I possibly use your phone—*please*?”

The girl studied him for a moment, her eyes narrowing playfully as her lips curled into a knowing smile.

“Okay, but only because you’re *super* cute and you’ve *totally* got kind of a rad *vibe*!” she said, her laughter light and inviting.

Noah felt a warm blush tint his cheeks as he offered a bashful smile.

“Thank you, I appreciate that,” he said as she handed him a cordless phone.

With a wink, the girl returned to her work, allowing Noah the necessary privacy. He turned away, the weight of the moment pressing on him as he dialed the number. With each ring, his heart raced, a silent

plea that August would answer. At that instant, Noah's Christian convictions were set aside; all that mattered was reaching out for help, irrespective of August's beliefs. Upon the fourth ring, a warm yet professional woman's voice filled the silence.

"Hello, Cameron Rehab Shelter. This is Tiffany. May I assist you today?"

"Uh, hi, yes," Noah said. "I need to speak to August. Is he available?"

"I'm sorry," Tiffany replied, "but Mr. Cameron doesn't come in on Saturdays and Sundays. Would you like to leave a message?"

As frustration washed over him, Noah exhaled sharply, a frown etching deeply into his features.

"Well, um—does he have space there at his shelter? Because my daughter and I need a—*better* place to stay than the shelter we're in now."

"Oh, well, firstly, we're not an emergency shelter," Tiffany responded, "so staying here would involve you coming here on Monday and having an intake meeting with Mr. Cameron, and then after that, he could put you and your daughter in one of our rooms that very same day, but it's not just a place where anyone can come immediately without having an intake meeting with Mr. Cameron first."

Taking the phone from his ear, Noah bit down hard on his lower lip and rolled his eyes. It seemed as if nothing was working out for him at that moment.

"Okay, well—um, look, do you have a way for me to get in contact with August?" Noah asked. "I mean, I—I kinda know him personally, and I *really* need to reach him."

"Well, just call him on his cell if you know him personally, or he can be reached through his literary agent."

Noah frowned with impatience.

"I don't know him *that* personally, but—look, I *need* to talk to him!"

Please!”

Tiffany sighed on the other end.

“Okay, look, what I can do is call him myself for you and have him call you. I have his cell phone number, and he said to call him if ever there’s an emergency, and it sounds like in your case—”

“It is!” Noah exclaimed. “It is an emergency, *please*.”

“Okay, what’s the number where you can be reached?”

Noah’s eyes widened. That’s right; how could August reach him if he had no number with which August could reach him? Spinning around, Noah took the phone from his ear and looked at the girl behind the counter.

“Um, excuse me,” Noah said. “A friend of mine needs a number to call me back on. Can I give him this number?”

The girl’s face scrunched up, and she slowly shook her head.

“Like, I *totally* would if this were my company,” the girl replied, “but I’m just the cashier here, and my manager specifically said no outbound or inbound calls on the store’s phone. I mean—I’m breaking a big rule by even letting you use the phone now, which means I’m going to *totally* have to make up some kind of lie to my manager when he comes in tonight, so—sorry.”

Noah let out a short, rough, loud breath as he frowned again.

“Well—do you have a cell phone—”

“Uh, yeah, but—*no*, like, you’re super cute and all, but I don’t *know* you, as *if*,” the girl said in a singing tone before rolling her eyes, snickering, shaking her head, and typing back on her computer again.

Noah’s nostrils flared, and his jaw clenched. If he could’ve gotten away with it at that moment, he would’ve grabbed that computer, smashed it against the wall, and demanded the girl let him use her cell phone number, but he wasn’t that type of person. His Christianity wouldn’t allow him to expel that type of rage. Sighing, he put the phone back to his ear and swallowed hard.

“Um, I don’t have a number,” Noah said to Tiffany, “but if you reach him, can you please ask him to come to the D.C. Village Emergency Shelter in Washington, D.C.? Tell him that my daughter and I were evicted from where we live, and I need him to talk to him. Tell him that we’ll be at the shelter all weekend. My name is Noah Hunter.”

“Oh—uh, okay, I’ll tell him, thank you,” Tiffany said before hanging up on Noah.

Noah ended the call with slumped shoulders and a distressed frown. Judging by how the call ended, he was sure that August’s chances of getting his message were slim to none.

“Thanks for letting me use the phone,” Noah said in a low, dejected tone before handing the girl the phone and walking out.

The quiet warmth of the bedroom was a thick, comfortable cocoon. August was submerged beneath his duvet, the remnants of Victoria’s elixir making his limbs heavy, and his mind delightfully fuzzy. He had been sound asleep for a couple of hours, but then the sudden, loud, insistent vibration of his cell phone on the nightstand startled him. He fumbled for it, squinting against the bright screen displaying a contact name he barely registered.

“Hullo?” August mumbled into the receiver; his voice slurred, thick with sleep and congestion.

“Grand rising, August,” the voice on the other end was bright, familiar, and carried a hint of playfulness. “How’s your a.m. going?”

August frowned, his eyes still struggling to focus on the ceiling.

“Tiffany? H—hey. It’s...it’s going. I was asleep.”

“Oh, I apologize for waking you—but you sound—rough. Are you okay?”

Hearing the concern in her voice, August forced himself to

surface through the drowsy fog. He cleared his throat, pushing the sleepiness out of his voice, making an effort to sound more like himself.

"Well, I was actually feeling pretty horrible earlier. My sinuses were killing me," he admitted. "But my mother came over and fixed her—magical, cayenne-laced elixir, and honestly? It knocked me out, but I feel marginally better, still a little congested but I'm not as bad as earlier."

"Good, I'm glad. I hope you continue to get better," Tiffany replied. "Listen, I actually called for a reason."

August sat up a little, leaning back against the cool headboard. The mention of a *reason* helped peel away the remaining sleep.

"What's up?"

"Listen, a Noah Hunter called the shelter. He mentioned he knows you?"

At the mention of Noah, August's expression tightened; the exhaustion vanishing. His posture instantly became more alert.

"Yeah, we know each other—somewhat anyway. What did he say?"

"He asked about shelter space and said he and his daughter got evicted. They're at some place called—the D.C. Village Emergency Shelter, all the way in D.C.? Anyway, he's hoping you can visit him today or tomorrow."

"D.C. Village Emergency Shelter?" August echoed, his voice thoughtful as he processed the information, a heavy knot forming in his chest. "Hmm, thanks, Tiffany. I'll look into it."

"Before you go," Tiffany's voice turned playful again, lightening the mood, "have you picked up your tux for Tuesday's charity event?"

August managed a small, tired laugh.

"Well, I was thinking jeans and a sweater might be more my style," he teased.

"August!" Tiffany exclaimed. "You can't be serious. Everyone's

expecting to see you at your best.”

“All right, well, I guess I’ll have to dress up then, especially if I go with you by my side.”

“So, we’re going together?” Tiffany asked, her voice hopeful.

“Well, yeah, Tiffany, I mean, you’re my best friend. Who else would I go with? Unless, of course, you don’t want to—”

“No!” Tiffany replied quickly, resulting in August laughing gently.

“I do! I mean—I was actually hoping we would go together.”

“Great,” August said almost softly with a genuine smile. “Anyway, I gotta go, but I’ll see you on Monday.”

“Absolutely,” Tiffany affirmed; her voice warm and filled with anticipation.

After ending the call, August dropped the phone onto the duvet, lied back down on his back and stared at the ceiling. The warmth from the nap was gone, replaced by a restless anxiety. *Noah, evicted? With his daughter?* August wondered how in the hell Noah ended up getting evicted from his home. He knew he was too drowsy and tired to go anywhere at that moment. *Later, I’ll hop online and find out about this shelter and then tomorrow, I’ll head over to Noah.*

It was close to eleven as Noah walked down three more blocks that displayed numerous businesses. He massaged the side of his head, feeling it throb. Every few steps he took, he would lift his left foot and then his right and rotate them in circles for a second or two as he felt the soreness in them growing stronger. His stomach growled with hunger numerous times while walking. He had no idea what to do, but the thought of returning to the shelter without food made him desperate. Stopping in front of a corner market, Noah paced back and forth while rubbing the side of his chin. He was thinking about how he

was going to execute the plan in his mind. As Noah looked at the numerous people walking past him, he exhaled with a brief close of his eyes and a frown.

“Jesus, please give me the strength and courage to do this,” Noah prayed under his breath.

As one older woman walked past Noah, Noah tapped her on the arm.

“Um, excuse me, ma’am.”

“Yeah?” the older woman answered.

“Um, I was wondering if you could spare a few dollars. My—”

“Uh, no, I can’t, sorry,” the older woman replied before walking away.

Instantly, Noah’s face and ears turned red as intense embarrassment flowed through him. The embarrassment almost made him a little dizzy as he held on to the brick wall of a business behind him for support. However, Noah couldn’t stop trying. He had to try again, and try again, he did. He asked men, women—*anyone*.

“Sir, I was wondering if you could spare—”

Noah stopped as the man he approached shook his head and walked away.

“Excuse me,” Noah said to a group of teenage girls, “my young daughter and I are homeless—”

“Eww!” one of the teenage girls said, causing the other teenage girls to break into laughter before they all walked away.

As Noah frowned, rolled his eyes, and sucked his teeth, one of the teenage girls walked back over to him and tapped him on the arm.

“Here.”

The teenage girl handed him one dollar.

“It’s not much, but it’s all I have left on me right now.”

Noah took the dollar and smiled.

“Thank you, I appreciate this. Jesus is going to bless you.”

Noah's smile dropped, and his eyes widened slightly as he saw the teenage girl's nose wrinkle; her brows turned inward, and her face tightened with disgust.

Oh no, there's that look again: the Christopher look, the Hazel look, the Emmanuel look, the 'you're insane to believe in God' look.

"Uh—yeah, well, good luck," the teenage girl said before walking away.

With a frown, Noah shook his head and closed his eyes briefly. What was *with* everyone thinking he was crazy for believing in God? He *wasn't* crazy. He felt fortunate and blessed to be a believer in Christ. He sighed with a roll of his eyes. *Whatever*. He had bigger fish to fry because getting food for him and Hazel would take more than one dollar. As a middle-aged, petite, stout woman walked past him, he touched her arm.

"Um, excuse me—"

"Don't ask! I'm not giving you *shit*! Damn bum loser!"

As the woman walked away, Noah sighed before frowning. While pacing back and forth, he briefly shook his hands as he felt panic rush up inside him. *What am I going to do!* At that moment, a woman in her early forties walked past him. Noah decided to try once more, hoping that this time would be different. If not, he'd have no choice but to return to the shelter, *defeated*.

"Ma'am, excuse me, look, I was wondering if you could spare a few dollars for my young daughter and me—*please*? We're in—"

Noah stopped as the woman held up her hand. Noah sucked his teeth, sighed, and rolled his eyes, feeling his heart sink. *God, not another rejection.*

The woman pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and handed it to him.

"Here, here's twenty dollars, it's not much, but at least it's something—"

Before the woman could finish, Noah pulled her into a tight hug, resulting in her laughing and hugging him back.

“Thank you,” Noah said tearfully, “thank you ever so much. I’ve been out here trying to get *some* kind of help and—”

“Almost everyone’s treated you like trash, huh?”

“Yeah, and my eight-year-old daughter and I are staying over at a shelter several blocks from here, but the breakfast they served was molded, and my daughter and I are hungry, and I didn’t want to stand here and do this but—”

“Hey, hey, you don’t have to give me an explanation, I know. I’ve been there. My mother and I were homeless several times over. If I had more, I’d give it, but I hope that helps—”

“No, it does; it really does. God *bless* you. I mean—unless you don’t believe in God, then, in that case, I’m sorry—”

“No, don’t be sorry, it’s fine. Thank you for the blessing, and I hope things get better for you and your little one.”

As the woman walked away, Noah sighed with a faint smile, feeling a huge weight lift off his shoulders. Even though it was only twenty dollars, that twenty dollars gave him *hope*.

Noah walked into the room he shared with Hazel, carrying a bag of food. Seeing her asleep with an open book on her chest made him smile with softened eyes. After being gone for so many hours, the mere sight of his daughter warmed his heart. He walked over to the bed and sat down beside her.

“Sweetie, wake up. I’m back.”

Hazel opened her eyes and gasped with a smile.

“Daddy, *finally!*” she replied before hugging him.

“Yeah, I’m so sorry, Hazel. It took longer than I thought to get us help.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Daddy. You did what you had to do

to take care of both of us; that's all that matters."

Noah stared at her with raised brows and a big smile.

"Wow, look at you, bringing forth the big girl talk."

Hazel laughed as Noah hugged her and kissed her on the forehead.

"I'm so blessed to have you, princess. I love you."

"I know," Hazel joked, which resulted in Noah laughing, "and I love you too, Daddy."

"Hey, excuse me," the Hispanic clerk said as she opened the door to the room and stepped halfway inside, "um, I got a guy on the phone at the front desk for you."

Noah looked back at her with a faint frown and a brow raised.

"A guy? Who is it?"

"I don't know," the Hispanic clerk responded with an attitude, "I didn't get his name or nothing but you can find out when you walk yourself to the front desk."

Noah's jaw tightened. He shot the clerk a look of pure, unadulterated annoyance, his eyes rolling toward the ceiling as if asking for patience. He turned back to Hazel, his voice dropping into a protective, gentle tone.

"Stay here, princess. I'll be right back, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy," Hazel said with a diligent nod, sitting back on the edge of the bed.

Noah followed the clerk down the hall, her keys jingling with every aggressive step she took. When they reached the desk, she didn't hand him the phone; she practically dropped the receiver onto the laminate counter and walked away without a word. Noah sighed, picked up the handset, and pressed it to his ear.

"Hi, who's this?"

"Hey, Noah, it's August Cameron. My assistant, Tiffany, told me you called the center looking for me. She said it was an emergency."

A physical wave of relief hit Noah so hard he had to lean his elbow against the counter. The air rushed out of him.

"August. Yeah. Thank you for calling back. I...I'm in a bad situation, August and I need your help."

The words felt like lead in his mouth. He spent the next few minutes stumbling through the wreckage of his pride, explaining the eviction, the nights spent shivering in the car, and the squalor of the DC Village Emergency Shelter.

"The food is molded, August," Noah whispered, his voice cracking with shame. "To be honest, it's not really even safe here. I can't—I just can't have my daughter in a place like this."

Noah took a jagged breath, his face heating up, before he swallowed hard.

"Is there any way—could we stay at your rehab shelter? Just until we get on our feet?"

There was a long, heavy silence on the other end of the line before Noah heard August let out a slow, tired sigh.

Noah frowned with a brief close of his eyes, bracing himself.

"Look," Noah blurted out, the words tumbling over each other. "I know I was a complete jerk to you the times you showed up on my doorstep. I was awful. But I desperately need your help—*please*."

The word felt like poison on Noah's tongue, a humiliating confession of weakness.

"Noah," August's voice was calm, but there was a distinct note of regret in it. "I'm very apologetic, really I am. But the shelter is booked solid. We're at capacity until the week after next."

Noah's heart dropped into his stomach. The defeat was instantaneous, visible in the way his head slumped forward. A flash of bitter anger sparked.

"Right. Fine. Figures. Thanks anyway, bye."

"Well, wait a second," August said, "don't hang up yet. There is

something else I could do though.”

Noah's hand froze over the receiver. He swallowed hard, the lump in his throat thick with humiliation and a desperate sliver of hope.

“What?” Noah responded with an edge of bitterness in his voice.

“Can you drive out to Chesterfield? Where I am?” August asked.

“No, I can’t,” Noah said, his voice flat with exhaustion. “I don’t even have enough gas to get around the corner.”

“Wow, okay,” August replied after sighing again. “Okay, um—new plan then. I’ll uh—drive over in the A.M. with a gas can. You and Hazel can follow me back to my house and you two can stay with me until a spot opens up at the center.”

Noah froze. He stared at the desk with his eyes wide.

“You’d—you’d really *do* that? I—I mean, you don’t even know us. Not really. And—I don’t even have any money to give you.”

“Well, you’re right. I know I don’t know you two well,” August responded, his voice taking on a lighter, almost airy quality. “But I know you’re in need, and that’s a good enough reason for me. As for the money? I don’t want it.”

August let out a small, playful huff.

“Even if you had it to give, I’ve got my own, thank you very much,” August said jokingly.

Noah let out a dry, surprised laugh. The first real laugh he’d had in days.

“But...but why though? After the way I treated you...” Noah's voice trailed off, thick with remorse.

Noah hated saying that, he even hated the fact that he needed August's help, but he was out of options.

“It's water under the bridge, Noah.” August responded, his tone surprisingly gentle. “See though, isn't it a surprise that an anti-Jesus, anti-Christianity blasphemer is helping you?”

As August laughed, Noah closed his eyes, a wave of conflicting

emotions crashing over him. He felt a surge of gratitude, sharp and intense, but also a deep sense of shame that he was in this position, relying on someone he'd treated so rudely. Noah rolled his eyes, a small, tired smile tugging at his lips.

"Yeah, yeah. Very funny. Thank you, August. I mean it."

"You're welcome, and I mean *that*. All right, so, I'll see you in the A.M.—"

"A.M.?" Noah repeated, frowning. "That's a weird way to put it. Why not just say 'the morning'?"

"Well, because when you say 'morning,' what you're really saying is 'mourning,'" August explained, sounding like a teacher talking to a student. "The words sound the same and so your IS-BE doesn't know the difference between the spellings; it just hears the vibration. You're telling your IS-BE to start the day in a state of grief. It's a low frequency. So, I say A.M."

Noah shook his head, completely lost.

"What exactly is an IS-BE?"

August laughed.

"We'll talk about that tomorrow. In the meantime, get some sleep, Noah."

"Okay. See you tomorrow."

Noah hung up the phone and stood there for a long moment, the silence of the lobby feeling less heavy than it had ten minutes ago. As he walked back toward their room, his mind was reeling. It was a bitter pill to swallow, yet it came with a strange, hopeful aftertaste. He thought of his church—the people who had promised to be his "family." They had offered him "thoughts and prayers" and then looked the other way when he lost his home.

Not one of them had offered a couch, let alone a room. Yet here was August Cameron. A man Noah had judged as a "nutcase," a man who didn't follow the Word, was the only one bending over backwards to save

him and his daughter. It was baffling. It was nonsensical. But as he opened the door and saw Hazel waiting for him, Noah looked up at the stained ceiling tiles. *Thank you, God, he thought silently. Thank you for August.* For the first time since the funeral, the weight on his chest felt light enough to breathe.



Through heavy breaths, Noah ran as fast as he could on sandy, rocky ground. Chasing behind him were several eleven-foot tall, muscular draconian beings with long, sharp fangs, enormous, dark brown wings, and three long, sharp horns sticking out of their heads. As the draconian beings ran, their arms swung back and forth rapidly, like a pendulum, revealing their glowing, long, sharp nails on their fingers. The faster the draconian beings ran, the brighter their green, reptile-shaped pupils glowed. As Noah shot a glare behind him, his eyes widened, and he gasped as he saw the draconian beings were just feet away from him.

Darting his eyes up to the sky, he was about to open his mouth and say a silent, mental prayer to God for help but stopped as he stared more observantly at the sky. There were no stars, no clouds, no anything, just darkness. Stopping in his tracks, he looked around him and saw that he was surrounded by darkness. It was as if he were in the middle of nothing, no buildings, no cars, no homes, no anything. Noah frowned with a shake of his head. He had no idea where he was, but before he could ponder anything else, one of the draconian beings knocked him down to the ground.

Before Noah could get to his feet, the draconian being climbed on top of him at a rapid, robotic speed and pressed its long hand down firmly onto Noah's head, holding it in place on the ground. The draconian being felt like a two-hundred-pound weight crushing down onto Noah's body. Noah tried to keep from breathing through his nose as much as he could so

he wouldn't inhale the strong smell of sulfur and rotting flesh that came from the hideous being on top of him.

"No! Get off! Get off me!" Noah yelled while struggling to move his head and body.

The draconian being opened his mouth and let out a loud, disembodied wail as the other draconian beings chanted in an unknown language and a low tone while repeatedly marching around in circles at an almost fast pace around Noah and the draconian being holding Noah down. As a thick, black beam of light shot out of the draconian being's mouth and into the middle of Noah's chest, Noah yelled out at the top of his lungs.

Tears clouded his eyes. He could feel his chest tighten as if his chest were a lemon being squeezed for juice. Closing his eyes, he felt a heavy, burning pressure throughout his lungs and throat, as if his lungs and throat were on fire. Opening his eyes, he gasped as the draconian being on top of him had transformed into Nicky, the homeless Puerto Rican man he was fighting with, in the main hall of the shelter. Noah clenched his fists as tight as he could and gagged as he felt hot electricity jolting through his chest, making him feel as if he was being electrocuted to no end. His face turned red, and every vein in his forehead and neck became visible. Then, he heard a faint scream from what sounded like a female. Noah shot open his eyes and—



With a loud gasp, Noah shot up in bed with his eyes clouded with tears and his breath heavy. He clutched his heart, feeling it thump hard and fast. Despite being awakened from his nightmare, Noah's arms and legs felt cold and sweaty; he could feel the inside of his body burning as if his insides were filled with hot lava. Noah frowned with widened eyes, feeling that something was off or wrong. Hearing a scream from a female outside his room, he shot his widened eyes over to the closed door of

the room, and for some reason unbeknown to him, he had the instinct to shoot his head over to the right side of the bed. Hazel wasn't there.

"Hazel!" Noah shouted as he jumped up out of bed and rushed towards the bathroom in the room.

Pushing open the bathroom door, he gaped with a frown as he found the bathroom empty and the floor flooded with water.

"Quick! Come on, hurry *up*!" Noah heard a male shout from outside his room.

Hearing other loud voices from both men and women outside of his room, Noah turned, rushed away from the bathroom doorway, and bolted out of the room. He didn't know why, but for some reason, he had a feeling that the commotion he heard outside his room was connected in some way to Hazel. He just *felt* it. Running down the hallway, the skin on his arms felt almost as cold as ice, and his arms felt weak.

His heart raced so hard and so fast that his entire chest ached with pain. He was almost sure he was going to have a heart attack and collapse right then and there. At the end of the hall, he saw a large crowd of homeless people encircled around something, and for some reason, that made Noah run faster, so fast that he felt a burning ache in both his legs.

"Excuse me, excuse me, *move*!" Noah yelled while pushing his way through the crowd.

As Noah made his way to the center of the crowd, his eyes widened, and he gasped as he saw Hazel lying on the floor in a pool of blood and coughing up blood with a large, open, bloody wound on her chest. Kneeling beside Hazel was an older, homeless man with his hands pressed on top of Hazel's wound. Tears flooded Noah's eyes.

"No!" Noah yelled while dropping to the floor beside Hazel and the homeless man. "Oh God, no, no, *no*!"

"Daddy!" Hazel cried through sobs. "Daddy, he stabbed me!"

"It was Nicky, the guy you were fighting with the other day,

man!” a homeless woman in the crowd yelled. “He saw her in the hallway, he started punching her, and then he just *stabbed* her! It was *insane*!”

As Hazel coughed up more blood, Noah pressed his hands down as hard as he could onto the homeless man’s hands on Hazel’s chest.

“Daddy, it hurts! It *hurts*!” Hazel sobbed.

“I know, honey, I know,” Noah replied tearfully, “I—come on, I’m getting you to the hospital!”

Noah scooped Hazel up in his arms and tried to pick her up off the floor, but she let out a loud, anguished scream before coughing up more blood.

“Daddy, *no*! No! It *hurts*!” Hazel screamed through sobs.

“If it’s hurting her, maybe it’s best not to move her!” the homeless man beside Noah yelled.

“Yeah!” the Hispanic clerk Noah and Hazel saw at the front desk the day before shouted as she ran over to the crowd. “I mean, I just called nine-one-one, and they said they’re on their way! So I’d just keep her here until they come!”

Noah sighed with a brief close of his eyes.

“Thank God! Okay, princess,” Noah said with tears streaming. “They’re on their way, okay? So just *hold on*! *Please*, just—”

Noah stopped as Hazel took several loud gasps. Her face turned grayish blue, and her lips displayed a blue tinge.

“Oh shit, she *dying*!” a homeless female in the crowd yelled.

“No!” Noah shouted through sobs. “No, Hazel, no, *please*! Please hold on, *please*, *please*!”

Looking at the wall behind Noah, Hazel frowned and shook her head.

“N—no, I—I *won’t*,” Hazel said in a low, weak voice.

Noah whipped his head behind him and looked in the direction of Hazel’s staring, but he saw nothing but a blank wall.

“Honey, who are you talking to?” Noah shouted while staring

back at her.

"She's becoming delirious!" a homeless man yelled. "she's going out of it—"

"Shut up!" Noah yelled to the homeless man.

"No!" Hazel said while shaking her head again. "I'm not going. Mommy told me not to!"

Noah's eyes widened at hearing this.

"Honey, *who* are you *talking* to?" Noah yelled with panic in his voice. "Are you talking to Mommy? Do you see her—"

Noah stopped as Hazel inhaled a sudden, long, loud gasp. Seconds later, after slowly exhaling, she slowly dropped her head to the side and stopped breathing.

"No!" Noah yelled before breaking into sobs. "No! Hazel! No! No! No, no, no, no, no!"

Noah dropped his head on her chest and broke into what was at first silent sobs but turned within seconds into an uncontrollable yell, a yell so loud that it could be heard from the parking lot outside. Noah sobbed so hard that his face turned from white to red, as red as blood itself.

"Come on, papa," the homeless man said to Noah while grabbing hold of Noah's arms, "She's gone—"

"No! No!" Noah yelled through severe sobs while fighting to pull away from the homeless man. "No! No! No, she's not gone! No!"

"Yes, she is! Now come on!" the homeless man said while pulling Noah up to his feet.

Breaking into another yelling sob, Noah collapsed to his knees. Kneeling in front of Noah, the homeless man pulled Noah into a tight hug. Noah sobbed so hard that his entire body was trembling. All the while, the tick-like creature that he had seen before had once again visited him and was watching him from a far corner of the shelter ceiling.

Not only was it watching him, but its body was vibrating and shaking as it let out a loud, continuous wail while feeding off Noah's emotional pain. However, Noah was so deep into the heartbreak he was facing at that moment that he didn't even notice that the creature was there. All he was focused on was the fact that there were now *four* people, *four important* people whom he had lost—his father, his wife, his friend and brother, and now his daughter, his little girl, his *angel*, the only motivation he had left for going on, now gone *forever*.

It was an hour later when the paramedics finally came. Then came the police to begin an investigation into what happened, followed lastly by the coroner's office, coming to take Hazel's body away. Noah watched it all while sitting on the outside ground, in front of the doors of the shelters. His mind raced through memories of every single detail about his daughter, from her smile to her small, round face—*everything*. As tears clouded his eyes, he closed them and clenched his fists tight.

"Daddy, he stabbed me!" Hazel cried through sobs.

Shooting open his eyes, Noah broke into an instant sweat all over his face, and he felt hotness rush through his body. Noah whipped his head around to the right, towards the inside of the shelter, and his eyes focused on Nicky, the man whom he punched in the main hall on the night of he and Hazel's arrival, talking to two police officers in the main hall.

"It was Nicky, the guy you were fighting with the other day, man!" a homeless woman in the crowd yelled. "He saw her in the hallway, attacked her, and then just stabbed her! It was insane!"

Noah kept hearing those words over and over in his mind as he stared at Hazel's murderer, and at that moment, his nostrils flared, his breath grew heavy, his eyes turned cold, hard, and flinty, and his face

turned red. Jumping up to his feet, Noah rushed inside the shelter, sprinted into the main hall, ran over to a handcuffed Nicky, and punched him so hard in the jaw that he fell out of his chair. Before Nicky could get to his feet, Noah bolted over to him, dropped to his knees beside him, and delivered hard blow after blow to his face.

"Mr. Hunter, get off him!" one of the police officers yelled while grabbing one of Noah's arms.

"Let go, Mr. Hunter!" the second police officer yelled while grabbing Noah's other arm.

With a loud, angry yell, Noah jumped to his feet, backpedaled several steps, spun around, and pushed both officers hard away from him. Spinning back around, Noah ran after Nicky as he saw Nicky trying his best to wiggle away as blood poured from his nose. Grabbing Nicky's legs, Noah dragged Nicky back over towards him, turned him over, dropped back to his knees and continued to deliver numerous, hard blows to Nicky's face until Nicky's blood splattered all over Noah's face and clothes.

"Mr. Hunter, don't *do this!*" the second officer shouted while running back over to Noah and grabbing Noah's arm. "Stop or we're going to shoot, *goddamn it!*"

Noah wasn't concerned about being shot. In fact, at that point, a shot to the head or several fatal shots to his body would've been a blessing to him. As Nicky went unconscious, Noah continued punching him in the face, resulting in his fist being covered in blood and the skin on his knuckles tearing. A third, tall, muscular police officer rushed into the main hall, grabbed Noah around the chest with both arms, and dragged Noah away from Nicky, resulting in Noah struggling to get himself free from the police officer.

"Let me go!" Noah shouted at the top of his lungs. "Let me go! I'm going to *kill him!*"

The third police officer body slammed Noah down on his chest

to the floor hard, resulting in Noah letting out a pained yell. As Noah struggled to get up, the third police officer put his knee onto Noah's back, pinning him down to the floor.

"Get off me!" Noah shouted at the top of his lungs.

"No, Mr. Hunter!" the third police officer yelled.

"Yeah, you're lucky we're not fucking taking you in!" the second police officer shouted.

"He *murdered* my *daughter*!" Noah shouted through sobs.

"We *know*! We understand, Mr. Hunter, but killing him isn't the way you *handle* it!" the first police officer yelled. "Now, until Officer Jones takes Mr. Garcia out of here, you're *staying* down on the *floor*!"

As Noah watched the second police officer grab Nicky up by the arm and drag him away, he bit down on his lower lip hard, so hard that he could taste blood in his mouth. He was beyond angry. He was *livid*—no scratch that, he was *enraged*, and not only at Nicky but at God as well.

CHAPTER TEN

The smell of freshly brewed coffee and toast pulled August out of his room and downstairs. He walked into the kitchen fully dressed in dark blue jeans, a crisp white hoodie, and a deep indigo denim jacket. He looked the picture of casual readiness, though he felt a bit light-headed from his rapid recovery. Victoria, who was at the stove carefully flipping pancakes, turned around and immediately spotted him. She put her spatula down, her hands flying to her hips in her trademark "mother is questioning your decisions" pose.

"August Cameron, what in the world are you doing up, out of bed, and fully dressed? I thought I'd find you mummified in the duvet until noon!" she exclaimed, her tone laced with concern and mock outrage.

August walked over to the coffee maker and poured coffee into a thermos he grabbed out of a cabinet. He took a sip and turned, giving her a winning smile before closing the lid on the thermos.

"Well, Mom, I'm cured. Fully and completely. Your magical elixir actually worked. My sinuses are clear, my headache is history, and I feel a lot better. All thanks to you."

Victoria tilted her head, a small, proud smile touching her lips, though she feigned surprise.

"Imagine that! Well, you don't have to thank me, darling. That's what mothers are for."

"Well, thank you anyway," August replied, "but now I have to run out. It's something important, work-related."

He moved toward the door. Victoria's brow immediately

furrowed in disappointment. She followed him a few steps.

“Work? On a *Sunday*? August, you were practically comatose yesterday. Do you really have to go out today for work reasons?”

“Yeah, unfortunately I do. It’s really important, and it can’t wait.”

He grabbed his car keys from the hook near the door. She sighed, a sound heavy with maternal disappointment.

“Fine. Okay. How long will you be? I was hoping we could sit and have breakfast together.”

August shrugged, regret in his eyes, but resolution in his voice.

“I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

Victoria placed her hands on her hips again, this time more resigned than annoyed.

“Well, I might as well go to church then, since you won’t be in the house with me and I’ll be sitting here alone.”

August smiled, his eyes twinkling mischievously. He gave a soft, sarcastic shake of his head.

“See? There’s a *perfectly* pointless way to fill your time while I’m gone. I knew you could think of something,” he teased, his charming sarcasm shining through as Victoria laughed with a slight shake of her head.

He walked swiftly toward her, wrapped her in a warm, tight hug, and pressed a kiss firmly to the top of her head.

“I love you,” he murmured into her hair.

Victoria instantly melted into the hug, holding him close.

“I love you too, honey bunny. Drive safely.”

August nodded, gave her a final squeeze and was out the door, the urgency of finding Noah already propelling him forward.

As Noah sat on the edge of his bed within the confines of the shelter, he

clutched the bedspread fabric with a desperation that painted his face a vivid crimson. With his eyes tightly shut, he conjured a vivid canvas of joyful faces—*Leah*, her radiant smile which always lit up his heart; *Hazel*, her infectious laughter which was always utterly contagious; *Christopher*, whose humor and steadfast brotherly love always uplifted him; and even his *father*, a figure of unwavering love, strength and guidance. In the sanctuary of his mind, he was surrounded by their presence; their voices, imbued with warmth and love, seemed to whisper in his ears.

However, as the illusion shattered with the opening of his eyes, the harsh reality set in. The room was silent, devoid of the comforting presence of his loved ones. They were not there to share in his pain, to offer words of solace, or to simply sit in silent support. The understanding that he was truly alone, that those he held dear were forever beyond his reach, struck him with a force that shattered what little composure he had left.

Tears, unbidden and relentless, coursed from his eyes as he succumbed to the overwhelming grief that had been his companion. In a desperate attempt to find solace, Noah's mind wandered to a memory—a memory of *Hazel* and the day that had changed everything. It was a recollection steeped in sorrow, yet it was a connection to her that he clung to, a reminder of the love that had once filled his life. The pain of loss was a heavy burden, one that seemed insurmountable in the silence of his room, but in his heart, the memory of their shared moments, however fleeting, provided a flicker of warmth in the cold expanse of his grief.

“She said she went to the bathroom in you all’s room,” one of the homeless women said, “but she said the toilet wouldn’t flush for her and it overflowed, so because she had to use the bathroom really bad, she went to ask the lady at the front desk if she could use the bathroom in the office, but the lady wasn’t there. That’s when she saw Nicky, and he just started

yelling at her and attacking her."

Noah's eyes flew open, and he clutched the blankets with a desperation that sent sharp pain shooting through his fingers. In that instant, a crushing wave of despair washed over him, and he was overwhelmed by the haunting realization that he had failed as a father. The weight of Hazel's murder bore down on him, a heavy reminder that he had let another loved one slip away, just as he had with Leah. As he rolled onto his side, the sobs flowed freely, each sob a testament to the agony of his guilt. It was as if his very soul was being ripped apart; the loud cries escaping from him morphed into anguished screams, and his body shook with the intensity of his grief. He felt a suffocating pressure pounding in his skull, but Noah was beyond the point of caring.

At that moment, he wished nothing more than to rupture a blood vessel and bleed out, to finally escape his hell. As he turned his head, his tear-streaked, red eyes landed on the bottle of Tylenol sitting on the nightstand, and the thought of ending it all clawed at him. What was left for him in his miserable existence anyway?

But then, like a cruel joke, the image of Jesus invaded his thoughts, igniting a firestorm of rage within him. He shot up from the bed, flung the door open and stormed out. He barreled past the homeless souls and the Hispanic clerk at the front desk, their shouts falling on deaf ears. All Noah could hear was a piercing horn blaring in his mind, stoking his fury with every heartbeat. The clerk and a few desperate souls chased after him, but when a homeless man dared to grab his arm, Noah shoved him away without a second glance. He sprinted to his car, started it with a roar, and tore out of the parking lot, hell-bent on one destination: Faith Landmarks Bible Church.

As August pulled into the parking lot of D.C. Village Emergency Shelter,

he stepped out and surveyed the surroundings with a grim expression of a frown. The sight of the shelter, resembling a prison with barred windows and a wire mesh fence encircling the entire area, filled him with a sense of pride for the effort he had invested in his own shelter. His shelter was designed to be warm, welcoming, and comfortable—everything that D.C. Village clearly lacked. Upon entering, he approached the front desk, where a Hispanic clerk was engrossed in her phone. As his attention went to a male janitor a few feet away, diligently mopping up a small puddle of blood, August briefly raised his eyebrows in surprise. August slightly shook his head with a brief frown while turning his attention to the clerk.

“Yeah, can I help you?” the clerk asked with a smile, her eyebrows arching in curiosity. “Wait a moment. Oooh, you smell *damn good*, honey! What kind of cologne you got on?”

August shifted uncomfortably, the concern for Noah evident on his face despite a brief, polite laugh.

“Valentino Uomo,” he answered tersely, hoping to redirect the conversation. “Anyway, I’m—”

“Ooh!” the clerk cut in. “That’s—”

“You know what?” August cut in, his smile strained as he tried to steer the conversation back to his original intent. “I apologize, but I really have to cut any type of small talk short right now. I’m here on an urgent matter. I’m here to see Noah Hunter. Would you happen to know which room he and his daughter are in?”

The clerk’s expression changed to one of surprise.

“Oh, are you related to him?”

“I’m more of a friend, really. Are they *here*?” August asked firmly, his tone conveying his growing impatience.

The clerk’s smile faded into a look of sympathy.

“I’m sorry, but he left in quite a hurry about an hour ago. And after what happened this morning—I don’t think he’ll be coming back.”

August's brow furrowed, and his gaze was intense as he blinked rapidly as if trying to process the weight of the moment.

"What happened?" he inquired as he shook his head slightly.

"His daughter was murdered this morning by one of the other residents here."

August's eyes widened in shock before he darted a look over to the janitor, who had just finished cleaning the blood-stained floor, before darting his eyes back to the clerk.

"What!" he said.

"Yeah, it was horrific. The father—Noah? Yeah, he was in pieces, crying and losing it, but who could blame him? No one ever thought Nicky would be capable of something like that—"

"Nicky? Who's Nicky?"

"That's the resident who killed Noah's daughter," the clerk replied, her voice heavy with the gravity of the situation.

August's gaze fell to the desk; his heart sank as he rubbed his face in disbelief, a frown etched deep into his features. He bit his lip and shook his head in a futile attempt to dispel the grim reality.

"Did Noah say where he was going?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"No, he just stormed out, jumped in his car, and drove away."

With a heavy sigh, August closed his eyes momentarily, nodding slowly as he absorbed the information.

"Okay, thank you," he said softly before walking away.

Once back in his car, August sat in silence, the weight of the news pressing down on him like a lead blanket. Tears clouded his eyes as he thought of Noah, a man he barely knew yet whose pain resonated deeply within him. As an empath, August felt the raw, aching sorrow that he knew had to have been consuming Noah after such a devastating loss. The thought of not knowing where to find him gnawed at August. What if Noah never reached out again? He briefly shut his eyes tightly and

sighed before starting the engine and pulling out of the parking lot. His mind raced with thoughts of how to connect with Noah and how to reach him in his time of need. Perhaps there was a way to tap into something beyond the ordinary—remote viewing, maybe? He didn't have all the answers, but he was determined to find a way to help, no matter what it took.

Within seconds of pulling up to the church's front doors and turning off his car engine, Noah bolted from his car and sprinted into the church.

"You!" Noah roared, his voice echoing off the walls as he charged forward, pointing accusingly towards the massive crucifix statue hanging above the pulpit, and that had a bloody and bruised Jesus nailed to it.

Noah stopped at the altar. His expression twisted into a frown of pure rage. He bit down on his lower lip so hard it looked like it would bleed again. His hands, trembling with fury, were balled into fists so tight that his knuckles turned a ghostly shade of white.

"Where do I even start with you?" Noah spat out, his voice dripping with contempt. "Maybe I should start with why. Why, God? Why are you *doing* this to me? I admit I'm not perfect, but I've poured *everything* into living a good, clean, Christian life! Since I was a *child*, I've *believed* in you; I *worshipped* you with *all* I had! And for *what*? For *this*? You *ripped* my little girl away from me, the *only* light left in my life! And before that, all the countless times I prayed, begged, and *pleaded* with you—to speak to me about Leah, about my job loss, about Hazel and I losing our home—I'd pray, and what did you do? You *ignored* me! *Why*?"

As Noah hyperventilated, he shook his head again as his face turned bright red and his nostrils flared.

"I said *why*! *Answer me*!" Noah yelled at the top of his lungs. "What did I do *wrong*? You know, it says in the Bible that you wouldn't

put more on people than they can bear, but my entire *family* is gone! This is more than I can bear! I mean, hell, you took my father when I asked you, when I *begged* you to save him! When he *himself* stood up in church and declared that he had the faith to believe that you'd *heal* him from cancer, you *didn't*!

You just—you just *snatched* him from me! The only parent I had, and you *snatched* him *away*! Then, in the Bible, you talk about how you put people through tests and trials, and okay, I get that, but—God, how far are you going to take me into these testings and trials? I mean, what's *next*? Do I—do I have to *die* to pass these trials and tests? You know, but Christopher—Christopher *tried* to warn me; he did, so many times he tried to warn me that you were full of *shit* and that I'd learn the hard way. He *told* me that one of these days I'd see *just* how much you *really* love me, but I didn't listen. I *refused* to listen to him—for *you*! August Cameron was right all along too; you *are* evil, you're—*incredibly* evil! So, no, I can't do it anymore. I *can't*! I'm sorry, but I'm only human! You have broken me with these testing of faith—*trials*, playing me like I'm just some kind of damn—puppet or something! No, find another sucker because you've lost one in me! I'm *done*! You hear that! I'm *done*! *Fuck* you!"

Spinning on his heels, as Noah turned and stormed out of the church, he loudly exhaled. He had no clue whatsoever as to what he was going to do next. However, the few moments he spent telling off God, venting out his rage towards him, made Noah feel good for the moment—*damn* good.

Upon returning home, August was relieved to see that his mother was still gone. He planned to astral travel to The Summerland, and he knew he could never do that with her in the house with him. Within minutes of lying on the sofa, he arrived in The Summerland. His eyes immediately

darted around the entire area, searching for Jack. August was about to shut his eyes tightly and try to mentally teleport himself to wherever Jack was, when he saw him. With his signature black cowboy hat on, Jack paced back and forth in front of a tall, dirty brown warehouse building. His face was a bit reddened and displayed a troubled frown.

Jack was distressed, and August could tell it; hell, he could *feel* it. Shutting his eyes briefly while shaking his head, August decided not to tell Jack about what happened with Noah. Because tell him for what? There was nothing Jack could do from where he was, and August knew that if Jack knew what tragedy had befallen Noah, Jack would have been even more distressed than he already was. August walked over to Jack, and as Jack saw him, Jack displayed a smile. The redness seemed to vanish from his face within seconds.

"You came back," Jack said before pulling August into a brief hug. "Thank you. I was going to send you a telepathic message, but—"

Jack stopped, looked away from August, and shook his head with a frown while shrugging.

"I don't know," Jack continued, "for some reason, I just couldn't muster up enough energy to do so. I think Enki probably had something to do with that."

"Yeah," August said. "Sending telepathic messages—that's one of the strongest abilities one can have. It's one I wish I could tap into." *Then maybe I could find Noah.*

"Yeah, I know," Jack replied. "It took me a while to get the hang of how to use it. We—all have—abilities here. Apparently, from what I've been told, we've always had these abilities, even when we were on Earth, but—we just never knew it. The telepathy ability is the only ability we're allowed to use here. The other abilities are forbidden to use, or else we'll face punishment."

"Why though?" August replied.

Jack swallowed hard, shook his head, and furrowed his brows.

“Because then, we’d all use them to escape from here,” Jack answered in a low, dejected tone of voice. “People have tried to use their abilities to escape, but they never seem to be fast enough because within less than a second, the astral law enforcement guards come and either take them to the lower astral realm or punish them in ways where—they’re whipped, burned, dismembered, flayed, or they’re—I swear it’s worse than any horror film I’ve ever seen in my lifetime, August.”

Hearing that made a chill run down August’s spine as he swallowed hard.

“The lower astral realm,” August said, “I’ve heard about the lower astral realm, but—what’s it like?”

Jack closed his eyes and frowned. Turning his head away from August, he opened his eyes and shook his head.

“It’s hell,” Jack replied in a low voice, “those damn bastards literally took the description of hell that they had their—Jesuit *puppets* write about in that goddamn Bible and made it a literal lower astral realm. Only it’s much worse than how the Bible described, and you’re not sent there based on any type of damn—earthly sin. Since being here, I’ve discovered that sin—and even karma—karmic debt—they don’t exist. They’re all used to guilt people into agreeing to the reincarnation trick when they die. People are sent to the lower astral realm anytime they do anything the rulers of The Summerland don’t like.”

“Have you ever been down there?” August asked.

Jack couldn’t even utter a word for a few seconds. All he could do at that moment was shake his head as his face turned red and his fists briefly clenched tight.

“No, but while up here in The Summerland, I’ve been—subjected to some of the torture that goes on down there,” Jack said in almost a whisper, “but—I don’t want to talk about it though—”

“Okay,” August replied in a soft, sympathetic tone, “you don’t

have to.”

“Well you look better,” Jack said with a faint smile, “which is good and so—have you gotten through to Noah?”

August sighed, looked away from Jack, and tucked his hands into his jeans pockets.

“Not yet, Jack, but I promise I—”

August stopped as Jack sucked his teeth and rolled his eyes at him before sighing and shaking his head.

“I just need *time*, Jack. I mean, your son isn’t the easiest person to talk to, but I will,” August said before briefly closing his eyes and looking away with a brow raised. *Once I find him anyway.*

“I saw a little boy get torn apart by Enki and six of his fucking demons last night, August,” Jack said with tearful eyes. “The boy was only ten years old, and I heard his screams and cries. I had his fucking—*blood*, flesh, and guts splattered all over me, and I watched as Enki and his archons and demons completely devoured every inch of that boy’s soul like they may have been feasting on a goddamned turkey for Thanksgiving.”

August swallowed hard with a brief close of his eyes and a frown, trying to erase the instant vision he had of a child being eaten up by Enki and his archons.

“And last night, Enki said that one day, everyone else here’s time would come too,” Jack said, “the time when each one of us will be devoured by him and his archons and demons just like that little boy was. That’s why I don’t *want* Noah *here*. I don’t want him to *come* here and go through what I’m going to eventually go through. That’s why I asked for your *help*. *Damn* it, you have to do whatever you can to get *through* to him, August. You *have* to.”

In Virginia Beach, as Noah's car stopped feet away from one of the metal gates blocking his car from the Virginia Beach pier, he closed his eyes for a few seconds, took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, and then slowly exhaled. He pulled a folded, color photo of his smiling father from his back jeans pocket and stared at it as tears formed.

"It all started with you, Dad," Noah said in a low, tearful voice. "When you left, it seemed like my world just—never felt the same again. Then I found Christopher, and we became like brothers, and then came Leah, and I loved her—so much, and then came our little girl, our angel, Hazel, but now—now, *all* of you are gone, and—I've never felt so alone before in my entire life."

Noah looked away and broke into sobs.

"I don't want to go on anymore, Dad," Noah said through sobs. "I'm *tired*. I can't go on anymore. I was barely able to go on when you died, and I struggled to go on after Leah and Christopher died, and now that Hazel's gone—I just—I *can't*. I know you never raised me to be a quitter. You raised me to be the fighter you always were, but—I *can't*, Dad, I just *can't*. I don't have any more fight in me left. I'm sorry. Hopefully, I'll see you soon."

As Noah closed his eyes again for a few seconds and let out a long sigh, he placed his father's photo on the front passenger seat beside him. He wiped his streaming tears away before grabbing hold of the steering wheel. Immediately after pressing down on the gas, his car headed straight for the metal gate, smashing right through it, causing the car's headlights to bust, both lights hanging on only by the wires that were connected to them.

With even more speed, he smashed right through the second metal gate, smashing the hood of his car inward. With a fierce grip on the steering wheel, he propelled his car onto the pier but then slammed on the brakes, bringing the car to a screeching halt. The sudden stop jolted him forward, a sharp gasp escaping from him as tears welled up in

his eyes, a deep furrow etching itself across his brow. *Is this truly what you want? Is there really no other way?* Closing his eyes, memories of Jack, Leah, Hazel, and Christopher flickered through his mind like a haunting slideshow.

When he finally opened his eyes, tears cascaded down his face, he understood the answers to those haunting questions. Shifting in his seat, he unbuckled his seat belt and pressed the gas pedal down, inching the car further onto the pier. At first, the movement was slow, but with each advance, a tightening knot formed in his stomach. It was a visceral reminder of the turmoil within. Heat radiated through his back, arms, legs, and chest, as if he were being consumed from the inside out. As he approached the end of the pier, he pressed the brakes several times, each action sending a wave of pain through his chest, a reminder of the weight of his decision. Deep down, he was resolute in his desire to end it all, yet with every inch closer to the edge, doubt crept in, gnawing at his resolve.

A final glance at his father's photograph brought forth a fresh torrent of tears, and in that moment, the fear that had gripped him began to dissipate. With renewed determination, he tightened his grip on the steering wheel and pressed the gas pedal all the way down to the floor, racing towards the end of the pier. Each inch brought a surge of adrenaline; his heart pounded wildly while his throat constricted as if a vice were tightening around it.

A chilling sensation coursed through his veins, leaving him feeling as though he were encased in ice. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead, and despite his firm grip, his hands felt strangely weak and unsteady, caught in the throes of a battle between fear and resolve. Tears cascaded down his face, each drop a testament to his despair. In a moment of sheer chaos, his car plunged off the pier, plunged into the frigid embrace of the ocean, and sank deep into the abyss. Trapped in the driver's seat, he glanced out through the windows, only to be met

with an endless expanse of water surrounding him. The impending rush of the sea was a certainty he could not escape. Noah's brow furrowed in anguish as he squeezed his eyes shut, briefly biting down on his lip with a fierce intensity. In that harrowing instant, he confronted a chilling truth: the fear of dying was gripping him tightly and filling him with questions.

Will it be painful? How long will it be before I die? Within a mere minute, the inside of the car was enveloped in water, the cold liquid invading every crevice. He released his grip on the steering wheel, surrendering to the inevitable. Lowering his head beneath the surface, he hesitated for a heartbeat before parting his lips, allowing the icy water to surge into him.

Instantly, a shockwave of agony coursed through his body; his lungs felt as if they were being scorched by molten fire. A grimace crossed his face as a searing pain pierced his skull, far more intense than any migraine he had ever endured. It was as if his head were engulfed in flames. His throat throbbed, feeling as though it were being torn apart by unseen hands. Desperately, he clutched the steering wheel once more, fighting against the overwhelming pain that threatened to consume him. Then, his vision blurred, the world around him faded into a suffocating darkness, and all that remained was an impenetrable black void.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hours later, as Noah lay on the Virginia Beach pier, he shot open his eyes with a loud gasp. Sitting up, he looked all around him with wide, alert eyes. *Am I still at Virginia Beach?* Getting to his feet, he gasped again as his entire body felt as light as a feather. Staring down, he gaped at the transparency of his body. His arms, his hands, and his legs were all transparent. *I'm dead!* Stepping back several feet from the edge of the pier, he stopped in his tracks and darted his widened eyes down at his feet. He realized at that moment that he hadn't been *walking*. No, he had been *gliding*. As he stared over at the water, Noah's shoulders slumped and he frowned with sadness.

At this moment, he felt an intense warmth coming from behind him. As he looked behind him, he saw a huge, bright, spiraling, white tunnel of light. As Noah stared into it, he felt every part of his body relax. He felt like he was being wrapped up in a soothing bear hug by someone or something he couldn't see. A euphoric warmth vibrated through every part of him. It was a feeling unlike any other he had felt in his life. As the tunnel of light changed into a glowing rainbow of colors, Noah's brows raised, and his eyes widened.

He felt as if every single muscle in his ethereal body had relaxed. With every passing second, it felt as if numerous large spherules of pleasure were exploding throughout every crevice of his body. To Noah, it felt like an orgasm times *ten thousand*. The more Noah stared at the colors within the tunnel, the more he knew within the depths of his soul that the colors were the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Seconds later, Noah saw a six-foot-two, athletically built man dressed in a floor-length, white, sparkling robe walking out of the tunnel towards him. Noah gasped and took several steps back. Seeing the man's dark brown, wavy hair that came down to his shoulders, his neatly trimmed beard, his bright, hazel eyes, his Mediterranean olive skin, the bright golden glow that surrounded his entire body, and his welcoming smile, Noah knew who the man was. It was Noah's messiah, his *savior*.

"Jesus!" Noah said in a low voice.

Stopping just inches away from Noah, Jesus smiled and patted Noah on the shoulder.

"Hello, my son," Jesus said in a deep, wavy, echoing voice. "We've all waited so long for you!"

Feeling guilty about the last conversation he had with God, Noah rolled his tearful eyes and stared down.

"I probably don't even deserve to see you," Noah said tearfully in a dejected tone. "I'm sorry about the things I said at the church. I was just—so *angry*."

Jesus laughed loudly.

"No worries, my child," Jesus replied, "you're forgiven. You're also *more* than deserving to see me. Come, follow me."

As Noah looked up and then behind Jesus, his eyes widened as he saw two enormous atom-shaped figures scrolling out of the white tunnel of light, with each figure having one, oversized eye in the middle of three, rotating, diamond-encrusted rings. Despite the shimmer of the diamond-encrusted rings, Noah frowned, and his mouth dropped. Shaking his head, Noah took several steps back.

"Who or—*what* are they?" Noah asked.

Jesus flashed a bigger smile before chuckling.

"They're just my angels, Noah," Jesus replied, "don't fear them."

But as Noah took more steps back from Jesus and expressed a short, rough breath, Noah *did* fear them. In all of Noah's reading of the

Bible, he had never heard of any angels looking like the ones he saw standing feet away from him at that moment.

“Yeah,” Noah said, “but I thought angels were—*human* looking with wings and halos—”

“Wings and halos?” Jesus cut in with a frown and a smirk. “Oh, the humor of Hollywood. They’re always adding their cinematic creativity to our religion, especially that Mel Gibson. *The Passion Of The Christ*, what a riot.”

Noah slightly tilted his head forward, raised his brows, and then frowned with a shake of his head as Jesus let out an eerie, hollow laugh.

“Um,” Noah said with another slight shake of his head, “why would you think—”

“No, Noah,” Jesus cut in while smiling, “look, the Hollywood depiction of angels is nowhere *near* accurate. Anyway—come, let’s talk.”

Noah darted his eyes over at Jesus and sighed with a brief close of his eyes. At that moment, Noah knew there was nothing he had to be afraid of. If Jesus said they were his angels, Noah believed him. Before Noah could think about anything else, Jesus took hold of Noah’s hand and led him into the white light with the angels following behind. Within seconds, Noah, Jesus, the angels, and the white light vanished into thin air. As Noah walked with Jesus further through the tunnel, Noah stopped and stared with widened eyes as the ceiling, the floor, and both sides of the walls of the tunnel displayed numerous video clips of certain moments throughout his life.

“*What?*” Noah said in a low, breathy tone. “How—”

“It’s your life, Noah,” Jesus said with a serious expression.

As Noah stared at each of the video clips, a pained frown appeared on his face. None of the video clips were of any happy moments in his life. *All the* video clips displayed moments that Noah had never even experienced or lived through, yet in every video clip, there Noah was. There were moments that showed him as a young kid, losing

his temper with his father and exploding into rage at him, moments that showed him as a teenager, getting into several brutal and bloody fights at school, moments that showed him in his twenties, sleeping with female after female throughout college while dating Leah at the same time, moments that showed him drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana with his friends during his first two years of college, moments that showed him and Leah getting into loud, shouting arguments during their marriage, moments that showed him and other men, breaking into people's homes and stealing everything in sight.

Unbeknown to Noah, as Noah stood there beside Jesus and his angels, Noah was being telepathically and mentally programmed and brainwashed by Jesus to believe that he had actually lived through every life moment he was seeing in those clips. Noah sighed with a close of his eyes. His face blushed a reddish pink. When he did open his eyes, he lowered his gaze down to the floor and frowned as strong feelings of guilt and remorse rushed up within him like a raging river. He clutched his stomach tight as he experienced an intense, burning, cramping feeling in the pit of his stomach, a feeling that his entire life, from beginning to end, had been one big fuckup.

"Oh, Noah, as you see here, you've made—*many* mistakes in your life," Jesus said with a shake of his head and a contrived, sad frown.

"I can see that," Noah said as tears streamed. "I mean—I can *feel* it. Look at this, this is—this is *horrible!*"

"The amount of karmic debt you incurred in your last life is—*overwhelming*," Jesus said in a soft voice, "and it *must* be paid back."

Noah looked away from Jesus and the clips, and his eyes clouded with more tears. He was sure he was on his way to hell for the shitty life he lived.

"Don't be saddened, Noah," Jesus said with an amused smirk. "After all, *you* can make it all right. I'm willing to give you another chance to go *back* down there and *make* it right by paying off your karmic debt."

Noah darted his head around at Jesus upon hearing that while frowning and raising a brow, hoping that Jesus didn't mean what he thought he meant.

"Wait, go *back* down there? You mean go back down to *Earth*?"

"Yes."

"No, but I don't *want* to," Noah replied, his voice quivering. "I mean, I—I know I did these—horrible things, but *please*, I want to go see my family—my father, my wife, my daughter, my brother—"

"You *won't* see them," Jesus interrupted. "You'll *never, ever* see them again if you don't go back down to Earth and pay off the karmic debt you incurred in the life you just left. You see, Noah, I'm giving you the chance to get things *right* in a brand new incarnation so you *can* see them all again!"

Noah rolled his eyes as more tears streamed from them. He was *tired*; his soul was so incredibly *tired*. The only thing he wanted to do was be with his family again.

"No!" Noah yelled. "I want to be with them *now*! I mean, God—"

"Don't *take* my father's name in vain, Noah!" Jesus yelled, his eyes changing from hazel brown to solid black within seconds.

Noah sighed with a roll of his eyes.

"Jesus, *please*, I don't *want* to do this again—"

"Noah, do it, go on," a male voice heard several feet behind Jesus said.

As Noah looked around Jesus to see where the voice was coming from, Noah gaped, and his eyes widened. It was his father, Jack, walking towards him. Tears flooded Noah's eyes again.

"*Dad!*" Noah said in a low, tearful whisper.

Jack, who was wearing a white kangol flat cap turned backwards, white scrub pants, a white shirt, and a long, floor-length, white robe with a bright, golden glow encircled all around him, walked up to Noah and took hold of his hands while smiling.

"Do it, son," Jack said, "it's the only way you can be with me, Leah, Hazel, and Christopher. It won't be a long incarnation. We promise."

With a deep frown, Noah rolled his eyes and then shook his head with a brief close of his eyes.

"But Dad, I'm so *tired*," Noah said tearfully.

Jack's loud, hollow-sounding laughter at that moment made Noah gape with raised brows. How Jack could have laughed at that moment, at something that was so serious and painstaking for Noah, was beyond Noah's understanding.

"I know, I know, son," Jack said, "but you *have* to incarnate. It's for the betterment of your soul. You have an entire eternity to be up here with us, but first, you *have* to incarnate again and get things right. *Trust* me, you do—trust your old man, don't you?"

Noah nodded while wiping his tears away, and as he looked up into Jack's eyes, he frowned with widened eyes. Something about his father wasn't right. For as long as Noah had been Jack's son, Noah had always known Jack to have grayish blue eyes, but as Noah stared at Jack at that moment, his eyes were no longer grayish blue. They were black, like marbles.

"Do you trust me, son?" Jack asked with an eerie smile.

Noah nodded with a frown. Jack smiled.

"Good! Good then!" Jack said before turning and looking back at Jesus with a full smile. "J, I think he's ready."

Jesus dropping his head back and laughing, along with Jack joining in on the laughter sent shivers down Noah's spine because their laughter sounded *sinister*, almost *evil* even. Shaking his head, Noah forced himself not to think of his father and Jesus' laughter as anything but laughter of relief over the fact that Noah *did* trust Jack, and because he did, that meant to Jesus that Noah had agreed to right the wrongs he did in his life.

"I think he's ready too," Jesus replied. "Come, Noah. Let's take you to get ready for reincarnation."

Before Noah could utter a word, Jack vanished into thin air. Jesus grabbed Noah's hand and led him further through the tunnel, and right at that moment, Noah shivered; a deeper frown appeared on his face as the intense, euphoric feeling of love, warmth, and pleasure vanished from him instantly. As he hugged his right hand to his body, Noah shook his head, feeling nervousness creep up inside him. Seconds later, that nervousness was replaced with fear, and he didn't know why. He felt that something about what he was experiencing with the white light, with Jesus, with his angels, and with Jack wasn't *right*.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The following morning, after August concluded his daily ritual of divine spark meditation, he picked up the TV remote and turned on the news as he walked into the adjoining bathroom. He was already speaking into his cell phone, his voice relaxed and cheerful.

“—of course, I’ll drive up there this Saturday and we’ll make a day of it.” August said before laughing warmly to something Victoria had said on the other end of the line. “Mom, you’re terrible! No, I’m serious though, I’d love to.”

He emerged from the bathroom with his blue jeans and white hoodie draped over his arm. As he listened to his mother talking on the line, he began pulling on his jeans. On the television, the somber voice of a news anchor cut through the morning air.

“In other news,” the anchor announced, “a shocking incident occurred as a vehicle was seen plunging off of the Virginia Beach pier and into the ocean with the entire scene being captured on camera.”

August paused his dressing routine, his eyes flicking toward the screen.

“The footage shows the car accelerating on the pier before dramatically plummeting into the ocean. The vehicle’s brake lights flickered erratically in the moments leading up to its harrowing fall.”

As the live video footage began to play, August’s body froze mid-motion. His eyes became instantly glued to the TV screen, the casual look of a moment ago replaced by an intense, fixed stare.

“Mom, I gotta call you back,” he said abruptly, his voice low and focused, never taking his eyes off the horrific image unfolding on the

screen.

He didn't wait for her response. Seconds later, he ended the call, almost tossing his cell phone onto the nightstand table by his bed, his full and immediate attention captured by the disturbing scene on the news. A chill ran down August's spine as the screen displayed a blue 2000 Kia Rio diving into the ocean. That car was unmistakable; it was the same one August saw in Noah's driveway. A gut-wrenching realization dawned on August as he saw the LVN4JC plate on the back of the car.

"No," he whispered, his voice cracking as tears formed. "No, Noah, no!"

He threw his clothes onto the bed in frustration before collapsing alongside them. His hands briefly covered his face as he reckoned with the grim reality: Noah's path had been set, driven by forces August had failed to intercept in time. Noah was on his way to being swept into Enki's ominous orbit, and August felt powerless to redirect the course. As August exhaled loudly, his resolve hardened. Wiping away his tears, he reached for his cell phone on the nightstand table with a sense of urgency and dialed.

"Damn it, Nell, pick up," August muttered, leaping from the bed to pace the floor urgently.

"August!" Nell said, her voice tinged with her British accent. "Are you as excited for today's book signing as I am?"

"No," came August's weary response, his head shaking regretfully. "I apologize, Nell, but I have to call off today's signing."

"What!" Nell responded, her disbelief palpable. "August, have you lost your mind? This is your third book—arguably your *best*. Your fans are eagerly *awaiting* this."

"I know," August replied, "but something's come up—a family emergency."

"Oh no," Nell said.

August pulled the phone away as a pang of guilt washed over him

for deceiving Nell, his agent of over eleven years and someone whom he considered as family. This was the first time he had ever lied to her.

"Yeah, it's—my cousin. I really apologize, but I need to be with my family. Could you call the bookstore and see if we can reschedule for tomorrow?"

"Yeah—" Nell paused, then relented, "all right, I'll handle it. Family comes first. Cripes, I'm terribly sorry, August."

August nodded, though Nell couldn't see. His posture was deflated, and his heart was heavy. He bit down on his lower lip hard, fighting back tears that had already clouded his eyes.

"Thank you," he managed to say in a choked whisper. "Let me know about tomorrow, okay?"

"Of course—wait, should I cancel your podcast interviews too?"

Glancing at the clock on his nightstand table, which read nine o'clock, August calculated the time until his first interview. He had some time, but venturing into the afterlife and to The Summerland, was unpredictable. Sometimes, what felt like an hour there stretched into much more on Earth.

"Yeah, cancel them. I'll be occupied all day, dealing with my cousin's passing."

"I'm so sorry, August."

"Thank you, Nell."

After hanging up, August threw his phone on the bed and stormed downstairs. Entering the living room, he was greeted by an eerie chorus of chirps reminiscent of thousands of crickets. His gaze darted around, landing on the massive, shadowy figures that resembled ticks plastered on his walls and ceiling. They were the *archons*, entities from The Summerland, lurking, waiting to feast on his energy.

"I'm not your prey, and I'm not *afraid*!" August declared with widened eyes; his fists balled in defiance. "I am *sovereign*!"

The chirping intensified, but as the shadows flitted aggressively,

August stood his ground, anger flushed his face red.

“You all and Enki think you have the upper hand with what you did to Noah?” he shouted. “You *don’t*! I *will* reach The Summerland! I *will* help Jack, Noah, and their family, and you all and your *psychopathic* gods *can’t* stop me! Now get out of my house!”

At his command, the shadows halted.

“Get out!” August yelled, his face red and the veins in his neck visible.

Immediately, the shadows vanished, as if banished by his will. August collapsed onto the sofa, caught between determination and panic, knowing he would have to set out for The Summerland without delay.

The Summerland

As Noah emerged from the blinding tunnel of light, his gaze fell upon the cobblestone streets, each stone etched with Sumerian, Luciferian, and occult symbols. The air was thick with a stifling, oppressive heat that clawed at his throat, making each breath a laborious task. The cacophony of voices—men, and women chattering in a dissonant symphony—filled his ears as he lifted his eyes to behold a sprawling city before him, a grotesque tapestry of stores, bars, and shadowy dwellings. Figures brushed past him, their eyes vacant, oblivious to his presence, as if he were a mere specter haunting their realm.

Encircling the city was a towering, dense green net, riddled with gaping holes, pulsating with a menacing energy; every few seconds, a jolt of electricity crackled through it, illuminating the darkness with a fleeting, eerie glow. Above, the night sky was a void littered with colossal stars that cast a dim, unsettling light over the scene. The air vibrated with the thumping, occultic music that spilled from a bar several blocks

away, a siren's call to the damned. To his left, a brutal melee unfolded, men wielding machetes and knives, their bodies slick with blood as one man cleaved another in two, blood spraying like a grotesque fountain. To his right, a primal display of lust erupted, five bodies entwined in a savage, sexual dance, their skin glistening with thick, dark blood. Nearby, two women screamed at each other, their voices sharp and venomous, echoing through the night like the cries of lost souls.

Before him, in the shadowy recesses of a narrow alley, six pit bulls were locked in a savage, blood-soaked brawl. His eyes widened in horror as he witnessed one of the beasts tear the head clean off another; blood spray painted the grimy walls, only for the severed head to miraculously reattach itself, the gruesome cycle repeating with relentless fury. Noah squeezed his eyes shut, praying fervently that this nightmarish scene was not his eternal fate. His stomach twisted painfully, knots tightening like a vice against his skin.

Each beat of his heart felt like a ghostly echo, a chilling tingle crawled up his arms and down his legs while a dull ache pulsed beneath his feet. The blood in his veins felt like ice, and the hairs on his neck bristled with an instinctual dread. Something was profoundly *wrong*; a sinister presence gnawed at his very essence. Then, a figure emerged from the darkness—a towering, draconian beast, its green, scaly skin glistening under the dim light.

With a head too large for its body and eyes like sunken emeralds, it approached with a predatory grace. The creature's long, thin mouth curled into a grotesque semblance of a smile, revealing razor-sharp teeth while its claws glinted ominously. At that moment, Noah understood the truth: he was *far* from salvation; he was ensnared in a *nightmare*, surrounded by horrors that could never be mistaken for angels.

As Noah spun around, desperation fueling his flight, he collided with two figures cloaked in flowing white robes. Their long, curly white

hair cascaded like ghostly tendrils, and their ocean-blue eyes glimmered with an unsettling depth, watching him with an intensity that sent shivers down his spine as Noah exhaled a slow, shuddering breath.

“Who—who are you two?” Noah asked. “What was that tall—thing I saw? What is this place? I thought I was getting reincarnated!”

The two men cocked their heads to the side at the same time as if they were robots. One of the men flashed an eerie smile at Noah.

“Welcome, Noah,” one of the men said in a hollow, robotic voice, “you’re in The Summerland, the astral afterlife—”

The Summerland, that name sounded familiar to Noah, but he couldn’t remember why. Squinting his eyes, Noah frowned.

“The Summerland? The astral afterlife? What—”

“Yes,” the second man interjected, “and we are your ascended masters. You will remain here for many years until it is time for your reincarnation.”

Noah’s eyes widened. He knew this wasn’t part of the plan because Jesus never said it was.

“What!” Noah shouted. “No! I’m supposed to reincarnate—”

“And reincarnate you will, Noah,” the first man said before displaying a wide, eerie smile, “but first, you will remain here, and while here, you will work for your housing, for your food—”

“Food? What food? I’m *dead*!” Noah shouted.

Both men laughed simultaneously, and what freaked Noah out was that their laughs were exactly the same.

“Silly Noah,” the second man said with a smile, “IS-BEs never die.”

Noah frowned with a brow raised.

“IS-BE? That word sounds familiar for some reason. What’s an—”

“Furthermore,” the second man interrupted, “while you may not *need* food here, you will most certainly *desire* food here, and if you want it, you will *work* for it.”

Noah shook his head with a brief close of his eyes. None of what

these men were saying made any sense to him.

"Is this part of the reincarnation?" Noah asked. "Like, the first part of it—"

"Yes," the first man cut in with a full smile, "you can look at it that way."

"You are free to roam about the city as you wish," the second man said. "However, teleportation, force push, fly travel, and any other abilities that are specified on that wall behind you are strictly prohibited within the city, and when caught using them—and you *will* be caught—you will face punishment."

Noah swallowed hard and frowned at hearing the last word of the man's sentence—*punishment*. Just hearing that word made Noah's stomach tie in a tighter knot.

"What kind of punishment?" Noah asked. "What—"

"You are also *never* to question authority," the second man interrupted. "Nor are you allowed to ever materialize money or goods using your abilities. If you do, you most certainly will face punishment. With that being said, it is highly suggested that you start looking for a job right away, Noah. Good luck."

Before Noah could say anything else, both men vanished into thin air. Sighing, Noah eyed somewhere, anywhere he could sit down because he felt an intense, stabbing pressure in his head, making him feel as if he were about to black out. As his eyes darted to the left, he eyed a large, open field park area with a massive gazebo and numerous benches. He rushed towards it but stopped a few feet from the benches as he saw his father, Jack, sitting on one of the benches, his head in his hands and his eyes closed. Walking closer to the bench where his father sat, Noah sat next to him and touched his shoulder.

"Dad," Noah said.

The sudden touch of Noah's hand made Jack shoot his head up and back away a little while gasping.

"Oh!" Jack said before sighing and briefly closing his eyes. "You scared me for a moment there. I thought you were them."

With a frown, Noah gaped at Jack's red eyes, the pronounced lines on his face, and the numerous bruises on his neck. Noah had never seen his father look so beat down.

"Dad, I thought you said I was going to be reincarnated," Noah asked. "What the hell am I doing here?"

Jack tilted his head at Noah with squinted eyes and a frown.

"Dad?" Jack asked. "I'm sorry, but do I know you?"

"What?" Noah asked. "Dad, stop joking—"

"Stop it!" Jack yelled with widened eyes as he shot up off the bench. "Stop *calling* me that! I—"

Jack stopped and stared at Noah, carefully observing his eyes and face. Then he *knew*, or at least he *thought* he knew, but he had to be certain.

"Oh my God," Jack said as tears clouded his eyes. "Oh my God, Noah? Noah, is this—is this really you?"

Noah shook his head with a raised brow and a frown.

"Of course, it's me, who else—"

Noah stopped as Jack rushed over and hugged him while breaking into light sobs. Noah frowned and hugged him back, not understanding the reasoning behind Jack's reaction to seeing him.

"Oh my god, you're all grown up!" Jack said tearfully. "Look at you, my little boy's all grown up! I can't believe it!"

As Jack glanced over to his right, he saw three eight-foot-tall draconians pacing back and forth, several feet away from him and Noah, while holding thick, black batons. Their eyes were red, glowing, and staring right at Jack and Noah. Jack knew what that meant, which is why he pushed Noah away at that moment.

"No, wait," Jack said before wiping his streaming tears away.

"What's wrong?" Noah asked.

"We're not—we're not supposed to show any emotions that are connected with happiness and joy here," Jack responded. "If we do, we'll get punished for it severely."

"What? No, no, you're joking—"

"I'm not!" Jack shouted. "I'm—I'm not, Noah. That's why those—those *guards* are over there *watching* us. Enki and his—people can't feed off anything but negative emotions, so only negative emotions are permitted here."

Noah stared at his father, as if Jack had suddenly begun speaking in riddles, his eyes wide with disbelief. For a moment, he wondered if the strain of this strange place had driven his father mad.

"Enki? What? Dad, what is this place? Why am I here?" Noah asked. "I thought you and Jesus said I'd be reincarnating."

Jack stared at Noah with a raised brow and a frown.

"What?" Jack asked. "I said? I *never*—"

Jack stopped, and his eyes widened for a few seconds before he looked down and to the side, shaking his head.

"Those sons of *bitches*," Jack said with a brief smirk.

"What?" Noah asked while walking closer to him. "What is it?"

"They showed you the white light, Jesus and me, didn't they?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, and you and Jesus both told me I had to reincarnate—"

"Aww, *goddamn* it!" Jack yelled while turning and walking away from Noah, and then pacing. "You *died*?"

"Yeah, but—but Dad, you used God's name in *vain*—"

"So! The *hell* with him!" Jack shouted.

"*Dad!*" Noah yelled.

"Noah, *he's* the one who *put* us here! *All* of us here! He's the reason why none of us here can *leave*!"

Noah shook his head as he felt a mild, burning pain shoot through it.

“Dad, hold on, wait a minute, wait a minute, what are you *talking* about? What do you mean none of us here can leave?”

Jack sighed, briefly closed his eyes, and covered his face with his hands for a few seconds.

“Noah, we’re in some kind of damn—astral afterlife prison—”

“*What!*” Noah yelled with widened eyes.

“Yeah, Jesus—God—Christianity, it was all a *lie*, and I *believed* in it, and you believed in it, and so did a whole lot of other people, and that’s why you and I and everyone else are all here and—”

Jack stopped, dropped down on the bench and shook his head with a frown. Noah sat down beside him and stared at him with a frown of his own.

“Dad, please,” Noah said in a low voice, “tell me the rest—what’s going on here?”

Jack sighed with another shake of his head.

“Jesus, God, heaven, hell, it’s all *lies*, Noah,” Jack said in a low voice. “It’s all lies, and I feel—so damn *dumb* for ever believing it all in the first place!”

Noah blinked back tears. He couldn’t believe what Jack was saying. There was no *way* he could believe it.

“What? What are you talking about?” Noah replied. “It’s *real*—”

“It’s *not!*” Jack shouted. “Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and *every* other religion down on Earth was created by fucking *Enki* and his insane son *Marduk*—”

“Enki, Marduk,” Noah said. “Who are—”

“Enki is Lucifer first and foremost, but he’s also God, Jesus’ father. He’s also Yaldabaoth, and he’s also Yahweh, The Most High, Yahawashi, *and* Allah. Meanwhile *Marduk* is Jesus, but *he’s* also every God of *every* goddamn religion on *Earth* because he *created* those religions! In *fact*, *every* time a damn Christian says amen, they’re giving *homage* to that psychopath Marduk, because Marduk also goes by Amun-Ra!”

Noah looked away with a brief close of his eyes and a shake of his head. Everything his father was saying at that moment sounded like absolute nonsense to him.

"Dad, do you hear yourself right now?" Noah asked. "You sound crazy."

"I know," Jack said as he nodded at Noah. "It *does* sound crazy, doesn't it? It's not, though. I swear, Noah, I've been here for—so many years, and you wouldn't *believe* the things I've discovered. Archons, which are these—these damn tick-looking—*parasites* and Enki and Marduk and their reptilians and draconians—they feed off *every* damn negative, energetic emotion *connected* to humans—your hurt, your pain, your anger, your violence, your jealousy, your envy, your depression, your worry, your—damn *tears*, your grief—"

Jack stopped as Noah gasped with widened eyes. Yes, of course, Noah remembered the tick-like creatures. He had seen them numerous times during his life: when he found out about Leah's murder, when he lost his job, when he was fighting with Nicky at the shelter, and when Hazel was murdered. Each time Noah saw the creatures, he was instantly catapulted into a state of fear.

"That's how they survive," Jack continued, "off of low vibrational, loosh energy, which is why they keep humans divided against each other over shit like *race*, *gender* and *class*, fighting each other, and committing crimes and violence against one another. It's why Enki, Marduk and their demons keep people suffering through jobs, bills, and other mental, emotional, and physical pains on Earth because through all that, they get *fed*. Enki, Marduk, and their archons *feed* off the *religions* they created—*every* damn time someone practices one of them!"

"I can't—I can't believe this," Noah said in a low voice with a frown and a shake of his head.

"Well, believe it because it's *true*," Jack replied. "Enki created Earth and turned it into a prison planet for humans, a living space where

humans could be used twenty-four-seven as a loosh energy food source. Earth isn't even—it's not even *real*! It's a—goddamn *simulation*! It's a goddamned simulated prison *planet*!"

The more Noah heard, the sicker he became. While breaking out into a cold sweat, he could feel his insides fill up with nausea. His mouth became dry, and several sharp, stabbing pains shot through his chest. He briefly covered his mouth and swallowed hard as he felt the sudden urge to vomit.

"No!" Noah shouted while jumping up and backing away from Jack. "This—*none* of this makes sense! Dad, I'm sorry, but I think you're just ornery or—or *angry*—"

"Ornery!" Jack yelled while rising to his feet and walking over to Noah, "*Angry*! You're goddamn *right*, I'm *angry*! Noah, we were *lied* to! *All* of us here were! This may not make sense, but it's *true*, goddamn it! There is no Jesus, or God, or Allah, or *any* of that other bullshit! Enki and Marduk made it *all* up to feed off people and to entrap them here for as long as they feel like it before shooting them *right* back down to his prison planet Earth to feed off them all over again!"

"No!" Noah yelled tearfully with a shake of his head and tears filling his eyes. "I *can't* believe this! God *has* to be real! You're—"

"I'm what? *Lying*?" Jack shouted. "Is that what you're about to say, Noah? That I'm *lying*? You think I'd *lie* to you?"

Noah turned away from Jack as tears streamed. Noah didn't want to believe Jack, but deep down, he could feel the truth in Jack's statement. It just seemed to resonate with him deep down.

"Noah, we're in *serious* trouble here," Jack said, "and *damn* it, this is why I tried to *reach* you before you *got* here, but—now that you're here, we're both in *deep* trouble! I've *seen* them strap people to that damn—*slab* over there and shoot thousands, if not *millions*, of electric jolts into them to *punish* them and to reincarnate them back down to Earth!"

Noah spun around and stared in the direction Jack was pointing, and there Noah saw it. Several feet away, almost near the outskirts of the city, was a gigantic, long, thick, black, leather, exam-styled table with four thick, glittery, black wrist and ankle straps attached to it. Several thick steel rings were encircled high above the entire table with electricity shooting through them every two minutes.

"So if all that you say is real, why did I see Jesus when I died then?" Noah asked. "Why did I see the *angels*? The white light? The *life review*—"

"That's how they *get* people, Noah," Jack replied, "as soon as anyone dies, they see visions that Enki and the archons put in front of them. They put visions of past loved ones in front of the person, and if the person is a Christian, they'll put a vision of Jesus and the angels in front of them too. *All of it is fake—*"

"Wait," Noah cut in with a brief close of his eyes, a frown, and a shake of his head, "so you're saying it wasn't you that I saw with Jesus in front of the tunnel of light?"

"No!" Jack shouted while shaking his head. "No, son. Enki and the archons *showed* you me to get you to *agree* to go into that damn white light after death. They can't *force* you to go into the light. They *need* you to *agree*, and then once you do, they *have* you. You're *theirs*! From there, they'll bring you here to feed off you and torture you for—*however* long they want before sending you *back* down to their Earth to be a food source *all over again*."

Noah nodded and then shook his head with a brief close of his eyes, choosing to believe his father because at that moment, no matter if Noah wanted to admit it or not, everything Jack was saying was starting to fit together like pieces of a puzzle, it was beginning to resonate with Noah's soul.

"And heaven and hell?" Noah asked, his voice becoming slightly tearful.

Jack shrugged with a shake of his head.

“Heaven doesn’t exist,” Jack replied. “Heaven was put into religious beliefs to manipulate people into believing that when they die and they see the white light, the white light will lead them to heaven. That’s why Enki and the archons show near-death experiencers the white light and heaven, so that upon the experiencer returning to their body, they can spread the word to *all* the masses about how they saw the white light and how it leads to heaven.

It *doesn’t*. The same goes for near-death experiencers having visions of hell. Enki and the archons show the experiencers that so that they can *spread* the word to *everyone* about how hell is *really* real and how they can escape it if they only *believe* in God, or Allah, or one of those other *bullshit* religious gods, which will only cause them to be brought straight here, to the *real* hell—this—matrix prison holding center before being reincarnated *again*.

You found that out, and so did I. In addition to all of that, the threat of going to hell for not obeying God was invented to *scare* people away from practicing things like astral projection and remote viewing, which leads to the truth.”

“The truth about what?” Noah asked.

“The truth about the fact that we *are* gods *ourselves*, Noah, and Earth *isn’t* where we all originally came from. No one *needs* to be down on Earth or is even *supposed* to be down there because Earth *isn’t* our *home*. It’s a *prison*. This *isn’t* our—*damn* home either! The free universe is, or—*pleroma*, as August termed it.”

Noah’s eyes widened at hearing that name—*August*.

“August? August—*Cameron*?” Noah asked.

“Yeah, I kept telling him to go talk to you, but—”

“He did,” Noah interjected, “he came to my house once, passing out flyers about some—rehab shelter. I slammed the door in his face because he started talking—against *God*. He came a couple of times after

that and told me about you being—*here*, but I didn't believe him. I also heard him on the radio talking against God and stuff."

Jack rolled his eyes with a shake of his head.

"He never got a chance to tell you the message I had for you."

"What message?" Noah asked.

"I told him to tell you to not go through the white light after death because it's a trick."

"Yeah, well, that August guy seemed a little like a nut job to me," Noah said with a shake of his head.

"He's *not* a nut job, Noah," Jack replied. "He knows a *lot* about this place, thanks to what I've told him about this realm. He comes here occasionally through astral projection. He tried to help us escape here, but it's hard. It's—so damn *hard* trying to leave because they can read your damn *thoughts* here. I don't know how they can, but they can."

Immediately, the visions of Leah and Hazel popped into Noah's mind.

"Dad! Leah and Hazel, they're my wife and daughter. Have you seen them? Did they make their way to you while here—"

"No," Jack interjected abruptly, "you have a wife and daughter?"

"Yeah," Noah answered in a low, dejected tone. "Leah died in a car accident, and Hazel was—stabbed at the shelter she and I were staying in."

"Shelter?" Jack asked with a frown and a brow raised. "You were homeless?"

Noah sighed with a brief close of his eyes while nodding.

"Yeah, Dad, I had—a horrible life."

"I had my car dealership though," Jack said. "Why—"

"Uncle Joel completely ran the dealership to the ground, and it went bankrupt before I even turned eighteen."

"Damn it, Joel," Jack whispered in a low voice before shaking his head.

Jack looked all around, and after seeing that the area was clear of the draconians he saw patrolling around them earlier, he walked over to Noah and pulled him into a hug. It was a hug that Noah readily embraced because at that moment, as tears filled Noah's eyes, he needed some kind of emotional and physical comfort to help him cope with all that he had just learned. Right then, an older woman, followed by a group of other men and women, ran to the open field park area.

"*Lucifer is coming!*" the older woman yelled with a shaky, panicked voice and widened eyes. "*Lucifer is coming! He's coming! He's coming!*"

Jack's eyes widened.

"Oh no, not again," Jack said.

Noah looked around with raised brows as the older woman, the other men and women with her, and Jack all stood instantly frozen with widened eyes and some with wide open mouths. Some of the men and women's faces were reddened, while others had broken into a heavy sweat; some of the men and women were even trembling. Almost in unison, they all dropped to their knees.

"What the hell?" Noah said. "Dad, what's going on? I—"

Noah stopped as Jack jumped up, grabbed him by the arm, and yanked him down to the ground on his knees.

"Get down on your knees *now!*" Jack yelled.

"Why? What does she mean Lucifer is coming?" Noah asked.

"Lucifer—*Enki*, he's coming," Jack said in a low voice. "Every time he comes, we have to kneel before him or face punishment."

Noah stared at his father with a brow raised. He couldn't believe how afraid his father was at that moment, even to the point where Jack's hands were almost trembling. Seeing his big, strong father go into such a state of instant fear and panic was almost embarrassing to Noah.

"No," Noah said before getting to his feet.

"Noah, what are you *doing?*" Jack shouted while jumping to his

feet. "Get back down on your goddamn knees—"

"No!" Noah said in a firm tone. "Are you *insane*? Kneeling to him—*Lucifer*? *Never*, I'd rather die first. Oops, that's right, I'm already *dead*."

As Noah rolled his eyes, Jack's face turned red, and his nostrils flared.

"Damn it, Noah, this isn't a *game*!" Jack yelled. "Enki and his—damn archon, draconian—*soldiers will hurt you—badly*! Even though you're in soul form, Enki has made it so you can still *feel* things and be *physically* hurt here! Your senses and *nerves* still *work* here! They will *hurt* you—"

"I don't *care*!" Noah shouted. "If all that you say about him, about religion, and about this place is real, and I now believe it is, then there's no way in *hell* I'm kneeling to that son of a bitch! *Fuck* him!"

Hearing loud, rumbling footsteps a few feet away, Jack slowly turned around and eyed what was coming his and everyone else's way. Feeling his stomach squeeze and tighten and his heart rate increase, Jack shut his eyes tight with a frown. He clenched his fists and bit down on his lower lip before dropping back down to the ground on his knees. Noah made a sour face at Jack. How could Jack show such respect to an evil filth like Lucifer?

There was no way Noah was going to, no matter what. Noah was determined to be as rebellious as possible. Standing tall with his chin up and shoulders back, Noah's eyes widened as he saw Enki, the twenty-feet, Herculean, shirtless man with long, curly white hair, thick, white eyebrows, and a long, white beard with three golden bracelets wrapped around it, walking over to him.

Following behind Enki were several ten-foot-tall draconians and ten sixteen-foot-tall black archons. Noah now knew for sure that what his father was saying about Enki, archons, religion, and the afterlife was true; seeing the archons *confirmed* it. However, to Noah, Enki looked like

any other old man he might have seen walking the streets of Richmond, Virginia during the summer, except Enki had no pupils, and his eyes glowed white.

Walking past each kneeling person, Enki nodded in acceptance at them but stopped a few feet from Noah, and that's when Noah *felt* it. Swallowing hard, Noah felt small beads of sweat break out on his forehead. His stomach tightened into a burning, cramping knot. His heart pumped so hard and so fast that he could feel a throbbing, stabbing pain in the center of his chest and back. His legs ached with a burning pain that made them feel as if they were on fire, while the rest of his body felt as cold as ice as if he were in the middle of below-zero temperatures. Noah could feel every hair on his body stand up. He was *encased* in fear, no matter if he wanted to be or not. Leaning his face forward towards Noah's, Enki smiled.

"Noah Hunter," Enki said in a low but deep, vibrating voice, "you've been one of my *best* and most *devoted* slaves, *welcome*. Now, *kneel* before me."

Blinking repeatedly, Noah felt an intense burning pressure in his head and behind his eyes. He felt as if he were about to faint at that moment, and he didn't know why, but he forced himself to stay conscious and on his feet. Swallowing hard, Noah tried his best to put on a brave face by clenching his jaw, flaring his nostrils, and widening his eyes.

"No," Noah said in a firm, cold tone, "*fuck* you."

"Noah, please don't *do* this!" Jack yelled. "Get down on your damn knees—"

"Did I *ask* you to speak, *goddamn* it?" Enki shouted at the top of his lungs while shooting his head down at Jack, resulting in thick, cold smoke spewing from his mouth and the vibration in his voice becoming stronger.

Jack shook his head without even looking up at Enki. Noah stared

at Jack with a disgusted frown. With the way Jack was acting, it was almost as if Noah didn't even recognize him. As Enki's glowing, white eyes changed into solid, bright red, he looked back at Noah. Clenching his jaw, Enki flared his nostrils, and his breath grew heavy.

"You *will* kneel before me or face *punishment*, a punishment unlike anything you've *ever* felt in your *entire* miserable *existence*, you useless *fuck!*" Enki said in a much deeper voice.

Noah blinked back light tears at that moment and he had no idea why. Was it a part of the fear running through him at that moment? Noah didn't know, but he had to admit that hearing the word *punishment* sent shivers down his spine. As Noah frowned and briefly leaned his tongue into the inside of his cheek, he had to be honest regarding the fact that his fear was causing him to be conflicted. Should he give in and kneel before someone so evil, manipulative, and corrupt? Or should he stick to his guns, rebel—and face whatever torturous punishment Enki and his servants would produce forth?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Enki stared at Noah with squinted eyes and clenched teeth.

"I said *kneel* before me, you fucking piece of nugatory shit!" Enki yelled at the top of his lungs blowing thick, cold smoke into Noah's face.

Noah closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He could feel a stabbing ache in his stomach.

"I said *no*," Noah replied in a firm tone.

Enki looked back at the draconians and archons and nodded.

"Enact punishment," Enki said in a low voice.

Before Noah could utter a word, four draconians shrank to his level and charged towards him with long, black metal bats and batons in hand. The sight of those weapons sent a clear message: a confrontation with Enki's men was about to occur, but Noah welcomed the challenge. He had a track record of winning fights on Earth and was confident this encounter would be no exception. As some onlookers wept, others stared in shock, their eyes wide.

Enki's gaze blazed a fierce yellow, and thick, black smoke enveloped him as he nodded at his draconians. Noah didn't think twice. He unleashed a left jab followed by a right hook aimed at the draconians, but his fists passed right through them as if they were made of smoke. *What the hell is going on? They can hit me, but I can't even touch them?* Just then, a draconian swung a baton, crashing it into the back of Noah's head. Blood erupted from Noah's mouth as he collapsed to the ground on all fours.

In an instant, the draconians swarmed him, mercilessly stomping

on his head and kicking him in his face and stomach. Every time he attempted to rise, they crushed him back down with brutal force. Amidst the chaos, a familiar loud chirping pierced through the haze, echoing memories from his life on Earth. Struggling to lift his head, Noah recognized the sound as coming from the archons lurking behind Enki. The archons' bodies vibrated and wailed in a haunting, resonant tone. Enki's visage morphed into a grotesque, half-human, half-Baphomet figure with twisted horns and a face dripping with blood and decaying flesh. Thick, black vines writhed beneath his skin, snaking around his face, neck, arms, and chest. His eyes blazed a more intense red, and Noah could hear his labored breathing, a chilling death rattle that sent shivers down his spine.

Noah's eyes widened as dark hues—purple, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red—shot out from his back and beamed into the gaping mouths of Enki and his archons. Just then, a draconian brought a bat crashing down on Noah's head, blurring his vision into a crimson haze. A brutal kick to Noah's stomach forced more blood to spew from his mouth and splatter on the ground. Pain surged through him, a relentless, burning throbbing pain that clawed from his head to his ankles. As Noah shielded his head with his arms, relentless, searing agony surged through him. He was expecting to have blacked out to unconsciousness at that point, but instead, he didn't.

Each kick, stomp, and strike pierced through him, leaving no part of his body untouched by the torment. Though his skin felt as if it were aflame, he could distinctly hear the sickening crunch of his bones fracturing within. With every ounce of his being aflame with pain, he felt the thirtieth strike land on the back of his head, forcing him to sink lower to the ground. His tear-filled eyes sought his father's gaze, who was kneeling nearby, quietly watching and weeping. At that moment, as tears streamed, Noah desperately attempted to convey a silent plea to his father, a heartfelt request for help, but Jack remained paralyzed,

unable to act. As the fortieth blow from the bat collided with his skull, the weight of despair overwhelmed him, and he finally succumbed to heavy sobs.

“Enough! *Enough* already!” Noah shouted tearfully, his frustration boiling over.

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Enki commanded the draconians to halt. As he did, his grotesque form reverted back to his Herculean self. He approached Noah, bent down to seize him by the hair, and yanked his head up with a cruel grip. Noah gasped before a loud cry escaped from him and blood cascaded down his battered face, mingling with the tears that stained his vision red.

“Are you ready to *kneel*?” Enki taunted, a twisted grin spreading across his face.

Noah nodded weakly. Enki's laughter boomed, a deep, mocking sound that echoed as the draconians joined in, reveling in Noah's torment.

“Good, on your knees, *now*,” Enki commanded, straightening up with an air of superiority.

With trembling, bloodied hands, Noah pressed down against the unforgiving pavement. As he struggled to rise, a wave of excruciating pain and pressure surged through him as if he were being crushed beneath an avalanche of boulders. A cry of agony escaped from him before he retched. Bile spilled out from his mouth as he finally sank to his knees. The ground felt like molten fire against his skin, sending shockwaves of pain from his knees to his thighs. Each breath was a battle; sharp, piercing pain sliced through his chest with every wheeze. Enki's smile widened, satisfaction gleaming in his eyes.

“See?” Enki whispered, his voice dripping with malice. “I told you you would kneel before me. Disobedience will *not* be tolerated among my *livestock*.”

As Enki's laughter faded into the distance as he walked away, the

draconians and archons trailed behind him, leaving Noah in despair. Moments later, Noah collapsed over on the ground, clutching his aching stomach, while onlookers stood up and walked away, indifferent to his plight. Jack, however, rushed to Noah's side with tears streaming and enveloped him in a tight embrace.

"Noah, I'm so sorry," Jack murmured tearfully.

Noah let out a gut-wrenching whimper as he struggled to rise to his feet, each movement igniting a fresh wave of burning, throbbing agony that coursed through his entire body. He squeezed his eyes shut, grimacing as the world around him spun uncontrollably. After a moment, he forced his eyes open and, summoning every ounce of strength he had left, he shoved Jack away from him.

"Don't *touch* me!" Noah yelled, his voice thick with tears. "You *traitor*! You—you *cowardly*, *fucking traitor*!"

"What the hell are you talking about? I'm *not* a traitor!" Jack hollered back.

"How could you just stand there and let them *do* that to me?" Noah shouted tearfully. "How could you just watch them *hurt* me like that?"

"I had no *choice*, Noah!" Jack yelled, his frustration boiling over. "If I had stepped in, they would've punished me too! They've done it before when I tried to save my own damn *wife*! Your *mother*! You have *no* idea what I went through!"

Noah glared at Jack, his eyes narrowed in disbelief.

"What?" he whispered, tears streaming down his face. "Mom was here?"

Jack stepped closer while nodding and grabbing Noah's arm gently.

"Yeah," he said in a low tone. "Look, I don't live far from here. Let me take you back to my place and—"

Jack stopped as Noah shook his head, pushing Jack away with a

fierce determination.

“No!” Noah yelled, his eyes blazing with anger. “I’m not going *anywhere* with you!”

As Noah turned and limped away, Jack remained frozen in place with tears streaming. In that instant, he felt the heavy burden of cowardice weighing on him. He yearned to reach out and help his son, but previous attempts to help others in the city had left him battered and emotionally scarred. Numerous times, Jack had attempted to be the hero, but those attempts had led to brutal encounters with dogs and much worse. The bravery he once had had diminished, and he wished Noah could understand the depth of his internal struggle.

Later that evening, Jack sat at the kitchen table of his small one-bedroom apartment, downing shot after shot of vodka. His eyes were glassy and dilated, his shoulders were slumped, and his face bore a constant frown, revealing the grief, heartache, and despair he felt. He was engulfed in anger and sorrow, not only for his own suffering in a hellish, oppressive environment but also because his son seemed to resent him for not being able to protect him.

With his eyes tightly shut, Jack longed for the courage to escape The Summerland and with him taking Noah with him, but he felt utterly paralyzed. A sudden knock at the door jolted him. He never knew who might be on the other side—perhaps an astral law enforcement officer ready to confront him about some imagined offense or a fellow resident intent on violence, as had happened so many times before. As he approached the door, Jack hesitated, taking a deep breath and holding it for a moment before exhaling. He silently hoped that whoever was outside meant him no harm. When he finally opened the door, a frown appeared on his face, but as he sighed loudly, his face softened at the

sight of Noah. His son stood there, eyes swollen and bruised, his face and clothes stained with blood, and his hair a disheveled mess.

“How did you find out where I lived?” Jack asked.

“I followed you,” Noah said in a low, hoarse voice. “I don’t have anywhere else to go; no one will let me stay with them, and it’s—crazy dangerous outside. So, can I come in and—”

“Of course, you don’t even have to ask. Come in,” Jack replied while moving to the side so Noah could come in.

As Noah limped in, he slowly turned and looked at Jack.

“If you could just point me in the direction of the bathroom so I can treat my bruises—”

“It’s down the hall to your left,” Jack cut in, “but I’ve got a first aid kit and I could help—”

“No, I can do it myself,” Noah replied before turning and limping down a back hallway before Jack could respond.

With a brief close of his eyes, Jack sighed. He could feel his heart skip beats. Hearing Noah slam the bathroom door shut, Jack knew that Noah was still angry with him, and to be honest, Jack was angry with himself.

Noah turned away from the bathroom door and stepped into the mirror’s reflection. The sight was unbearable; his face was so swollen that he barely recognized the person staring back at him. He closed his eyes as memories flooded his mind, starting with his journey of faith at the tender age of three, a steadfast belief that crumbled after his father’s death, only to be rekindled during his high school years. Noah’s entire life had been a relentless struggle: a dead-end job that drained his spirit, an unwavering loyalty to God despite losing Leah, then losing his job, his home, his best friend, and finally, his daughter. In a moment of despair, he sought solace in death, hoping to reunite with his loved ones—but

instead, he found himself in The Summerland, a realm of endless sorrow, manipulation, and torment.

Noah bit his lower lip and sank to the floor as tears streamed from his eyes. Why did he have to keep *suffering*? Earth had already been so *hard*, and now he was stuck in an awful place like The Summerland *forever*. He couldn't even escape by ending his life because he was already physically dead. At that moment, he began sobbing loudly and soon heard a soft knock on the door, followed by the door opening and Jack stepping inside. Noah glanced at him for a moment but then looked away, letting the tears flow again.

Seeing his son in such pain made Jack's heart ache, and immediately, Jack felt tears sting his own eyes. He sat down next to Noah and wrapped his arms around him tightly. Noah hugged him back, crying even harder. On Earth, Jack could always find a way to help his son feel better, but there in The Summerland, everything felt so hopeless. Jack himself felt powerless, knowing there was nothing he could do to take away Noah's hurt.

Later, Jack sighed as he sat at his kitchen table next to Noah, two steaming cups of coffee in front of them.

"I just, I feel like such a fool," Noah said in a low voice, "I feel like I've been duped, just—*all* that time, wasted on believing—*lies*."

"I know, I feel the same way," Jack replied. "I mean, I was born and raised on God and Jesus and Christianity, you know that. I grew up believing that there was a heaven after death. By the way, did you know that the name Christianity was named after Christopher Columbus?"

Noah's eyes briefly widened before he frowned and shook his head.

"What? What do you mean it's named after Christopher Columbus?"

“Christianity didn't exist before 1492,” Jack said, “no one even knew what a Christian was before then. The Jesuit Roman Catholic Church ordained and canonized Christopher Columbus to be a saint. His whole primary objective was to come to America and push the—catholic doctrine, which is named after the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, *which* is where they got the idea to name—”

“America from,” Noah cut in with widened eyes and a slight shake of his head.

Looking down, Jack nodded.

“Yeah,” Jack replied in a low voice. “Instead of calling the religion that Marduk, the Catholics, and Christopher Columbus created—*catholic* or—the catholic doctrine or something like that, they decided to call it Christianity. Christopher felt it was appropriate to name the religion he brought to America after him—*Christopher, Christianity.*”

Dropping his head in his hands and closing his eyes, Noah frowned and sighed, feeling as if his head were spinning.

“Unbelievable,” Noah said in a low tone while shaking his head, “the whole concept of Christianity is all based on—”

“Lies,” Jack cut in, “lies with a sinister purpose behind it.”

“Dad,” Noah said as he shifted around in his chair, “there was a time when I was—alive on Earth, I was in my house, and all of a sudden, I heard Landslide by the Dixie Chicks just—all of a sudden come on my stereo—”

Jack nodded with a frown.

“One day,” Jack interjected in a low voice while staring at the table, “I had just undergone one of Enki's punishments. A while afterward, I came right to this table, and I sat down, and I began to *really* think about you. I thought about when you were first born, about when you took your first steps—”

Jack paused and briefly looked away from Noah as tears glistened in his eyes.

"I thought about the first time I ever saw you cry," Jack continued, his voice breaking, "and then I remembered Landslide, and the more I thought on it all, the more I began to really, *really* miss you. Then Enki's goddamned—goons came in and—away it went."

With a deep frown, Noah displayed a sad smile while taking Jack's hand.

"I missed you too, Dad. Every day I missed you—so much."

Jack pulled Noah into a brief, warm hug.

"So, how many people are here?" Noah asked. "I mean in this entire—city."

"Millions," Jack replied, "I've seen a lot of famous people here. They came and then were electroshocked and sent back down for reincarnation."

Noah nodded.

"Is that what happened to mom?" Noah asked.

Jack stared into his cup as tears welled up in his eyes again. Squeezing his hand into a fist, Jack couldn't seem to get himself to mouth the words that would give his son an answer.

"Dad?" Noah said.

Letting out a loud exhale as tears streamed, Jack nodded and cleared his throat.

"They—they sent her out for reincarnation," Jack said in a tight, tearful voice. "I fought, begged, and pleaded, but they did it anyway."

"Oh my God," Noah said with tearful eyes, "*how?* What happened—"

"I don't want to talk about it, Noah," Jack cut in abruptly while slightly turning away from Noah as more tears filled his eyes.

"Yeah, but Dad, I—"

"I *said* I don't want to *talk* about it," Jack said in a cold, sharp tone, his tearful voice becoming more noticeable.

Noah stared at Jack with softened eyes.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” Noah said before sighing and shaking his head. “Dad, look, I—I don’t *want* us to reincarnate. I want us to get the *hell away* from here. We—we *have* to get away from here—*somehow*.”

As Noah briefly shut his eyes tight, he sighed and clenched his fists. There had to be something—*anything* he could do to get him and his father out of the hellish environment that they both were in. Noah couldn’t think of anything at that moment, but he would. He was determined to.

At two in the morning, Jack was ensnared in a restless solitude, lying in bed with his gaze fixed on the ceiling above. Despite his best efforts, sleep eluded him as if it were a stranger he could no longer acquaint himself with. He couldn’t recall the last instance when the night had been kind enough to offer him a full embrace of rest. The question of sleep seemed almost trivial now, especially when his worries had doubled, not just encompassing his own well-being but extending to his son’s as well. A heavy sigh escaped him, laden with regret. *God, I wish I hadn’t gone through that damn light.* In a desperate attempt to escape his own thoughts, he closed his eyes, willing himself to find solace in the darkness behind his eyelids.

After several long, agonizing minutes, sleep finally claimed him, though it felt more like a surrender than a relief. Not too soon afterward, Jack found himself adrift in a dream, a vivid recollection of his second month at The Summerland. It was his first encounter with Energy Harvesting Day—a memory so sharply etched into his mind that it conjured a mix of fear and a poignant sadness that seemed to resonate with his current state of despair—

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Jack had been in *The Summerland* for two long months, and as he stirred awake on the cold, unforgiving ground of a narrow alley, he let out a weary sigh, rubbing his aching back. It felt as if a legion of tiny daggers were relentlessly piercing his skin. Pushing himself up, he groaned softly, rolling his eyes in disbelief. How had he fallen so low? Homelessness was a fate he had *never* known on Earth, yet here, in this twisted realm, he was nothing but a shelterless soul. To secure a roof over his head, he needed money, and to earn money, he had to find a job. Jack was resolute; by day's end, he would find a better place to lay his head than on the ground in a filthy alleyway.

As he wandered the streets, a glimpse through a restaurant window caught his attention. Inside, chaos reigned supreme—patrons were locked in savage brawls, blood painted the walls like a grotesque mural. Some wielded knives, while others swung baseball bats and chairs; the air was thick with violence. Jack's heart raced as he noticed the grotesque figures lurking among the chaos: large, black, tick-like archons with eight long, hairy legs. Their slanted yellow eyes glowed with a sinister light, their bodies vibrating in sync with the escalating brutality around them. The more the violence erupted, the more the archons seemed to thrive, feeding off the terror and bloodshed that filled the air.

"Jesus Christ," Jack muttered as he shook his head slowly, disbelief etched across his face.

As he walked down the street, a sudden crash shattered the air, and he recoiled instinctively as a man was hurled through the glass of a nearby coffee shop, the shards glinting like teeth in the dim light. The man's body tumbled onto the pavement just as a monstrous truck barreled past, its wheels grinding him into a grotesque smear, blood spraying like a macabre fountain. In a heartbeat, grotesque, spider-like creatures, black as night and glistening with malice, erupted from the sewers, scuttling towards the remains.

They sank their fangs into the flesh of the man, and a chilling scream pierced the air. Jack watched with widened eyes as more blood splattered across the ground. Clenching his fist against his mouth, Jack fought against the bile rising in his throat, the taste of dread bitter and acrid. With a shuddering breath, he pressed on, but the scene remained unchanged. Each restaurant he passed was a theater of brutality, with patrons and staff locked in savage combat while the tick-like creatures clung to the walls, reveling in the chaos. As Jack turned the corner, his heart sank further as he witnessed the same carnage spilling into the streets, sidewalks, and parks, a relentless tide of violence that seemed to consume everything in its path.

The chaos erupted like a hellish symphony, bodies thrashing and writhing in a grotesque ballet of violence. Fists pounded against the flesh, nails clawed at the skin, and knives plunged mercilessly into the soft, yielding bodies. Bricks and baseball bats became instruments of destruction, wielded by those consumed by a primal hunger, gnawing at their victims as if they were feral beasts. Blood painted the ground in a macabre tapestry, splattering across the grass, asphalt, and streets, a vivid reminder of the carnage. Jack's gaze flickered upward, and he gaped and his heart sank as he beheld the sky, now a writhing mass of monstrous archons, larger and more grotesque than the tick-like horrors he had glimpsed in the restaurants.

They vibrated and wailed, their cacophony merging into a single, nightmarish, booming chorus of a million tormented souls. The anguished cries of men, women, and children intertwined with the feral howls of animals created a deafening symphony of despair that echoed through the cursed city of The Summerland. Jack pressed his hands against his ears. A deep frown etched across his pale face. *This can't be real, this can't be real!* Desperation clawed at him as he darted into a nearby alley, praying for a glimpse of hope on a different street. But as he emerged, the horror unfolded anew—brutal, bloody confrontations

raged on, a relentless cycle of violence. Suddenly, the air thickened with a suffocating, crimson smoke, swirling with grotesque, lion-like faces that roared with a demonic fury every fifteen seconds. Jack stood paralyzed as a fierce struggle erupted nearby. He barely dodged a flurry of fists and blades.

His heart raced as one woman's butcher knife severed her opponent's head, sending it hurtling towards him. He leapt back with widened eyes of sheer panic as the severed head landed mere feet away, a chilling reminder of the madness that surrounded him. As the woman with the knife twisted her head towards Jack, her blood-soaked teeth glistened in the dim light, and a chilling, otherworldly shriek erupted from her lips.

"Die, you fucking bastard! Die!" the woman screamed, raising the glinting blade high before charging at him.

"Uh oh," Jack said before spinning around and sprinting down the street.

With every glance over his shoulder, he realized that the more he ran, the closer she seemed to get. A series of sharp, agonizing pangs pierced his chest, his heart raced like a frantic drumbeat. The thick, crimson smoke enveloping the city obscured his path, but one thought consumed him: he had to escape the deranged woman behind him, or he would meet a fate far worse than death. As he ran, the haze began to clear, revealing a nightmarish scene of savage battles unfolding around him—humans clashing with each other violently and animals tearing each other apart. Buildings erupted into flames, only to miraculously reassemble and ignite a grotesque cycle of destruction once more.

"Hey! In here! Come on, *quick!*" a young woman said while ducking her head out of a warehouse building and staring at Jack.

As Jack ran up to her, the young woman grabbed his arm and yanked him inside the warehouse before shutting the door behind him.

"Are you all right?" the young woman asked Jack.

Leaning over and resting his palms on his knees, his breaths were heavy and loud, which meant he didn't even have the oxygen to answer her yet. His chest was burning as if someone had lit a match to it. Despite him now being still, his heart was still pulsing fast and even skipping a few beats. He felt a light ache generating up and down the back of his legs, and somewhat of a heavy sweat had broken out on his face. After a few seconds, he shook his head.

"No," Jack said in a low voice while still between breaths. "It's like a war zone out there! I've *never* seen anything like it before in my *life*! It's like everyone's gone *insane*!"

"It's something new that Enki implemented here in The Summerland," the young woman answered. "Every Friday, starting today, Enki is commanding that we all go out and brutally beat and kill each other, and if we don't, we'll be punished by not being allowed to work or have food, water, or money for an entire week. He calls it Energy Harvesting Day. I'd rather go the week without food and working rather than go out and participate in that shit."

"Wait a minute—you said an energy harvest—*what*? What are you talking about?"

"Enki and his archons collect and feed off the negative loosh energy that's expelled from the violence outside," the young woman continued, "which is why he's requiring us to act it out every Friday."

"Is this hell?" Jack asked in a light, almost whispery voice, looking up at her with his clenched brows. "Are we all in hell?"

"Well, it's *like* hell, I'll tell ya that, yeah," the young woman said. "No, but this is a punishment realm that people go to before being reincarnated. If you're not out participating, why are you even *outside*, man?"

"I—I don't really have a place to go," Jack said with a slight shrug and a frown. "I'm—homeless, and I need a job."

The young woman slowly nodded.

“Well, my name’s Annie, Annie P. Stayton, and it just so happens that I’m hiring, and I know of a cheap apartment that you could rent—”



Jack awoke from his dream with his eyes fluttering open as he gazed at the ceiling. A deep frown was etched on his face. Yes, now he recalled why he could never enjoy a full night’s sleep. Every time he attempted to rest, his dreams were consumed by bleak, tormenting memories of The Summerland—a place he would have done anything to escape if only he had the courage to act.



In the eerie silence of the early hours, Noah was sprawled across the makeshift comfort of a sofa bed nestled in Jack’s dimly lit living room. The ceiling above was a blank canvas to the tumultuous thoughts swirling in his mind. He was haunted by the absence of Leah, Hazel, and Christopher—friends whose whereabouts were shrouded in mystery, igniting a relentless ache that burrowed deep within his core. As he lay there, enveloped in a blanket of doubt and fear, his mind inadvertently drifted back to a pivotal moment in The Summerland. He recalled the stern warning issued by one of the enigmatic figures he had encountered upon his arrival:

“You are free to roam about the city as you wish. However, teleportation, force push, fly travel, and any other abilities that are specified on that wall behind you are strictly prohibited within the city, and when caught using them—and you will be caught—you will face punishment.”

The mere mention of such fantastical abilities—teleportation, telepathy—plunged Noah into a deep pool of introspection. Did he, along

with Jack and the other denizens of The Summerland, genuinely possess these extraordinary capabilities? Driven by a mixture of skepticism and curiosity, Noah sat upright, his gaze dropping to his ethereal hands, their transparency hinting at the otherworldliness of his current existence. Despite the looming threat of dire consequences, a rebellious spark ignited within him.

The prospect of wielding such powers, of potentially unearthing abilities that could aid in the search for his family—and maybe even provide a means of escape from The Summerland—was too tantalizing to ignore. With his eyes closed and his heart pounding with a mix of fear and anticipation, Noah extended his arms, his palms facing each other as if holding an invisible sphere between them. He recalled the command for one of the forbidden powers: *Force push*. Almost instantly, a sensation akin to a current of electricity surged through his arms, a pulsating rhythm throbbed in the palms of his hands. Moments later, as Noah opened his eyes, he saw a sphere of electrifying blue energy burst forth, illuminating the room with its vibrant glow and casting a network of shadows that danced frenetically across the walls. Noah's wide eyed astonishment was palpable, a mixture of awe and disbelief etched across his face.

"Holy shit," Noah whispered, a grin spreading across his face.

However, this moment of triumph was short-lived. The abrupt sound of the front door being forced open shattered the silence, and Noah's heart skipped a beat. Framed in the doorway stood an imposing contingent of alien grey astral law enforcement officers, their towering eight-foot statures casting an ominous shadow into the room. Armed with thick, black metal batons and pipes, they exuded an air of relentless authority. Their ghoulish appearances, characterized by massive, soulless black eyes, grotesquely wide mouths, and skin that resembled brown, dry rot, struck fear into Noah's heart, resulting in him swallowing hard with a deep frown. Instantly, the electrifying blue sphere dissipated

into nothingness. At that moment, the realization hit Noah like a tidal wave—he had tested the laws of The Summerland, and now he was poised on the brink of facing the brutal consequences of his actions.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Noah's heart raced as he realized he had to act fast to escape another brutal encounter with the astral law enforcement. He sprang to his feet, darting towards the living room window, but before he could even grasp the handle, three officers lunged at him, pinning him brutally to the floor.

"Get *off* me!" Noah roared, thrashing against their grip. "Let me go!"

"Shut the *fuck* up!" one officer barked, driving his boot into Noah's back, resulting in Noah yelling in agony.

Jack burst into the living room, his eyes wide with shock at the chaotic scene unfolding before him.

"What the hell is going on?" Jack shouted, his voice cutting through the tension.

"Shut up!" an officer snarled, charging towards Jack with a baton raised menacingly. "Unless you want to join him, I suggest you *keep* your fucking mouth *shut*!"

Jack locked eyes with the officer, the officer's once black gaze now burning with a fierce red. Jack swallowed hard before rolling his eyes and backing away slowly, understanding the threat.

"Get *off* me!" Noah yelled again. "I didn't do anything *wrong*!"

"You practiced your damn abilities, which is *strictly* forbidden in The Summerland, and you *know* it, you fucking *scum*!" one officer shouted.

"Throw him into the Land of Klipoth!" another officer commanded, his voice booming.

Jack's breath caught in his throat at the mention of Klipoth. He knew the terrors that awaited anyone sent there, a fate no soul deserved.

"No! Please don't send him there!" Jack pleaded. "I—"

His words were cut short as an officer swung his baton, striking Jack's back and sending him dropping to the ground, a yell escaping from him.

"I told you to shut the fuck up!" the officer growled.

"Stop!" Noah yelled, desperation lacing his voice.

"Shut your fucking mouth, you worthless *shit*!" one of the officers shouted to Noah before yanking Noah up to his feet.

Immediately, a large, fiery red, swirling tunnel opened up on the floor. Upon seeing it, Noah gasped with widened eyes. To him, it looked like a portal to hell, the same fire-filled hell he had read about in the Bible.

"No," Noah said in a low voice with a shake of his head and tearful eyes. "No, no, no—"

"Yes!" the astral officer holding Noah by the back of the shirt exclaimed with a smile before pushing him into the hole.

As Noah hurtled through the dark tunnel, terror gripped him, and a scream tore from his throat. His eyes bulged in horror at the grotesque visages that emerged from the slick, blood-soaked walls—faces were twisted and decayed, their yellow, slit-pupil eyes glimmered with malevolence mere inches from him. The deeper he plunged, the more the cacophony of anguished wails enveloped him, a chorus of a million tormented souls merging into a single, deafening roar that clawed at his sanity. When he finally tumbled out of the tunnel, he dropped down hard on a thick, viscous, crimson surface that bubbled and writhed beneath him.

The moment his skin met the searing ground, he yelled in agony as his flesh began to sizzle and peel away, consumed by the inferno

below. Noah's gaze fell to the seething ground beneath him, a hellish sea of molten lava that licked hungrily at his skin. The agony was relentless; his flesh would regenerate only to be consumed again in a cruel cycle of torment. A guttural scream tore from his throat, echoing through the suffocating heat. It felt as if a swarm of venomous bees was relentlessly stinging him, each jab a reminder of the searing pain that radiated deep into his bones, suffocating him, stealing the breath from his lungs. Desperation clawed at him as he sank to his knees, instinctively trying to crawl away from this infernal landscape.

He yearned for a patch of solid ground, a sanctuary from the relentless flames, but with every inch he moved, the lava devoured him anew—flesh burning, reforming, and burning again in a grotesque dance of suffering. His tear-filled eyes darted around, taking in the horror that surrounded him. To his left, a group of men and women writhed in agony as their backs were lashed by fiery whips that left trails of charred skin in their wake.

To his right, a grotesque tableau unfolded: a throng of men, women, and children writhed in agony as a pack of ravenous dogs and wolves tore into their flesh, their howls mingling with the screams of the dying. Nearby, the scene grew even more macabre; hapless souls were ensnared by the serpentine coils of inland taipan snakes, their bodies pinned to the ground, while forest cobras slithered forth, sinking their fangs into the helpless victims again and again, a relentless cycle of venom and despair.

In front of him, chaos reigned as terrified men, women, and children fled in a desperate bid for survival, pursued by three towering figures—Baphomet-horned archons, grotesque and bloody, belching flames that licked hungrily at the air. Alongside them, shadowy specters loomed, their twenty-five-foot forms cloaked in darkness, with glowing red eyes that pierced the gloom, relentless in their pursuit. Amidst this horror, he recognized infamous serial killers, their twisted visages

marked by thick, black circles around their eyes, their skin stretched taut and nearly translucent, revealing a network of grotesque, red veins, pulsating with a life of their own and intertwining with writhing worms. Their teeth jutted out like jagged blades, elongated and menacing, reminiscent of the fanged creatures of nightmares.

With widened eyes, Noah's heart raced as he witnessed the infamous Richard Ramirez, a figure of terror, pounce on an elderly woman, his laughter echoing with a sinister glee. The glint of his elongated claws flashed as they plunged into her chest, tearing through flesh with a grotesque fervor. Noah's vision blurred with tears as he watched the horror unfold, Richard's mouth descending upon her, ripping away chunks of her very being with a ravenous hunger. His gaze darted away, only to be met with another cacophony of chaos—people flailing and shrieking while engulfed in a seething sea of molten lava. Their skin sizzled and peeled, only to regenerate in a grotesque cycle of agony.

Desperation clawed at him as he spotted a winding path of solid asphalt just a few feet away, a beacon of hope amidst the madness. He *had* to reach it. He sprinted towards the asphalt, but agony erupted as the flesh on his face began to sear away, his eyes feeling as though they were being wrenched from their sockets by unseen hands. The torment was suffocating, a vice tightened around his chest, making each breath a struggle, each movement a monumental effort. With a primal scream, darkness enveloped him, a void that lasted an eternity of fifteen seconds before he found himself back in the inferno, his body intact yet still trapped in the lava's embrace.

Panic surged through him—he *had* to escape this fiery torment and he had to do it quickly. Battling through the searing agony that clawed at his insides, he propelled himself towards the asphalt, each movement a tormenting reminder of his fragile state. As he heaved himself up, it felt as though his bones were splintering, each joint

screaming in protest, while his skin seemed to stretch and tear under an invisible weight. A guttural yell escaped from him as he dragged his battered body across the unforgiving surface, his stomach scraping against the rough ground.

Gasping for breath, he caught sight of his own flesh, marred and blistered in patches, yet somehow still clinging to life. Tears streamed down his face, blurring his vision as he gazed upon the desolation around him—charred remnants of buildings, homes reduced to ash, and bridges that had succumbed to the inferno. Fields blazed like hellish beacons, casting an eerie, crimson glow over the city, transforming it into a nightmarish landscape.

Noah's eyes were drawn upward to the towering circular walls that encased him, grotesque structures composed of rotting, charred flesh from which flames licked hungrily at the air. Hundreds of feet above, a sky churned with darkness, crackled with lightning, as if the heavens themselves were in torment. Encircling these hellish walls were nine platforms, each a grotesque display of suffering, a testament to the horrors that unfolded in this twisted realm. The neverending screams and cries from millions of souls were deafening.

Noah's gaze was drawn to a nightmarish spectacle unfolding before him. On the first platform, a throng of naked bodies writhed in a chaotic mud pit, but this was no ordinary mire; it was a treacherous blend of filth and glinting blades hidden beneath the surface. Each time a clump of mud struck a participant, the concealed razors would pierce their flesh, sending electric jolts coursing through their veins until their bodies erupted in a gruesome display of blood and viscera, splattering the air with macabre artistry. Yet, as if trapped in a nightmarish loop, they would rise again, only to endure the same horrific fate anew.

On the second platform, Noah witnessed a harrowing scene: men, women, and children engulfed in a relentless downpour of garbage, their cries of despair echoing through the air. The garbage morphed into

monstrous, white worms, their grotesque forms writhing with malevolence. Noah gaped as he saw their large, obsidian eyes of the worms, glistening with hunger and their elongated, serrated teeth gleaming like daggers, ready to rend flesh from bone.

Noah's eyes widened and glistened with tears as he witnessed the grotesque spectacle before him. Ravenous and insatiable, the worms gnawed hungrily at the tender flesh of men, women, and children. Blood erupted in crimson geysers, painting the ground in a horrific tapestry of life and death. Each soul writhed in agony; their screams echoed through the air, only to be silenced as they succumbed to the relentless feast. Yet, in a cruel twist of fate, they returned, their bodies reanimating in a grotesque parody of life, doomed to suffer the same torment anew as the writhing mass of garbage worms descended upon them once more.

On a third platform, Noah saw a scene of unspeakable horror: countless men, women, and children trapped in open tombs as their bodies engulfed in searing flames. The air was thick with the stench of charred flesh, and their desperate cries for mercy only fueled the inferno. With each anguished wail, their skin blistered and peeled away, their organs were reduced to nothing but ash, yet death was not their final escape.

Moments later, they would rise again, their faces twisted in terror, forced to relive the agony of their burning flesh, trapped in an eternal cycle of suffering. Noah turned his gaze from the horrific scene unfolding before him, squeezing his eyes shut as a deep scowl twisted his features. He was ensnared in a nightmare, a realization that clawed at his sanity. This was not a punishment for sins or misdeeds; no, he was trapped here for defying the twisted, draconian laws of The Summerland, decrees forged in the malevolent mind of Enki, a being whose cruelty knew no bounds.

"Please get me out of here," Noah said in a low, tearful voice.

"Please, please, someone, *anyone* listening to me, *please* get me out of here."

Behind him, he heard a low growling. Shutting his eyes tight, Noah clenched his fists as his heart pounded faster. A frigid dread enveloped him, seeping into his very bones. The air was thick with an unspeakable terror, paralyzing him as he stood frozen; his heart pounded in his ears. He felt an insatiable urge to look back, to confront the darkness lurking behind him, yet fear held him captive. With a trembling resolve, he turned his head around though, and his breath caught in his throat.

Towering before him was a grotesque Baphomet archon, its forty-foot frame looming ominously. Six long, jagged white horns jutted from its skull, framing a face of decaying flesh and tangled hair, while its enormous, glowing red eyes pierced through the shadows. The creature's mouth, lined with razor-sharp teeth, opened wide, unleashing a bone-chilling roar that echoed through the night. Panic surged through Noah as he yelled, leaped to his feet, and sprinted down the path, but the Baphomet was relentless, its speed unmatched. Instantly, the Baphomet closed the distance, crashing into Noah with a force that sent him sprawling to the ground.

"No!" Noah cried, desperation clawing at his throat. "Let me go!"

As Noah struggled beneath the weight of the beast, it slammed him onto his back and pinned him down with brutal force, treating him like mere prey. Without a moment's hesitation, the Baphomet's long, glistening claws raked across Noah's face, neck, and chest, tearing through flesh and sending a spray of blood into the air. Each desperate attempt to fight the Baphomet and escape only fueled the creature's savage assault, its claws descending with merciless precision. Noah's chest split open, and he gasped, choking on the thick, warm blood that surged from his wounds, the world around him fading into a nightmarish blur. Noah's voice erupted into the suffocating darkness, a desperate

wail that clawed at the air.

“Help! Someone, *help* me!” Noah cried at the top of his lungs.

At that moment, he was certain death was creeping closer—not a physical one, but a death of the spirit, a surrender to the torment that consumed him. The agony coursing through his veins was a relentless fire, each pulse igniting a new wave of suffering that constricted his throat like a vice. It felt as if invisible hands were tearing at his very essence, ripping apart his skin, his flesh, his insides with a cruel, unyielding ferocity.

As the Baphomet's claws dug into Noah's liver and lungs, Noah's resolve crumbled. His arms fell limply to his sides as the fight drained from him like blood from a wound. Loud, hysterical sobs erupted from his throat, raw and unrestrained, a haunting plea for help that he hoped would reach someone beyond the cursed realm of Klipoth, someone who could shatter the chains of his torment.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Earth

August had been immobile on his living room sofa for an entire seven hours, deeply immersed in his attempt to astral project. The practice, which normally succeeded almost instantly for him, was unexpectedly failing today. Despite lying motionless with his eyes shut and feeling the familiar vibrations signaling the onset of astral projection, his soul stubbornly remained within the confines of his physical body. Frustrated, he abruptly opened his eyes.

"Goddamn it!" he shouted, leaping to his feet in a mix of anger and confusion and pacing back and forth.

Why couldn't he astral project today? It wasn't as if he was inexperienced; on the contrary, he had *several* months of successful astral projection trips under his belt, making him quite the expert. So, what was the barrier today?

"It's me," stated a deep, masculine voice from behind him.

August spun around quickly, and his eyes widened in shock at the sight before him: a towering male figure, seven feet tall, with a slender build and pale skin, dressed entirely in white. The man's white hair, flowing down to his waist, framed his glowing white eyes, creating an ethereal presence. August felt sudden anger at seeing the mysterious figure's sudden appearance.

"Who *are* you?" August asked, his voice dripping with disdain.

The man chuckled before a playful grin spread across his face.

"Oh, come on, Cameron...you *know*—*exactly* who I am.

We've...crossed *paths* before. I'm Sakla. Remember?"

The man's words tumbled out in an off-kilter rhythm, punctuated by strange pauses and emphasis in all the wrong places, as if savoring each syllable. The cadence was so *peculiar* and *unpredictable*, it struck August with a feeling of *uncanny* familiarity, vaguely recalling the distinct, halting delivery of actor Christopher Walken.

"Anyway...your release of—*angry*, loosh *energy*...that's why I'm *here* with you...*right* now. I was the one who revealed...the true form of that *wretched*...*bitch* wife of yours. Wait, let me think—what was her name again? Ah, yes...*Samantha*!"

With his fists clenched tightly, August fixed his gaze on Sakla, his jaw set in determination. Then, August briefly averted his eyes away, only to whirl back around and launch a punch aimed at Sakla's face. But in an instant, Sakla vanished, reappearing behind August with a laugh that echoed in the air. August's nostrils flared wide with each sharp, hot inhale, and the veins in his neck stood out like cords. The most alarming change, though, was in his eyes: they were narrowed, shining with a dangerous, glassy intensity, their focus pinning Sakla like a target. A deep, angry furrow formed between August's eyebrows, creasing the skin until he looked less like a man and more like a predator ready to spring.

"Oh, that's it. That's the face," Sakla murmured, his smile now thin and cold. "Little bit of fury...inside that *head* of yours. *Good*. You weren't like that before. You were...*soft*, like a *baby*—but this—*this* I can use! See? We *always* knew you had it. We'll just be waiting. *Right here*. When you finally scratch your way out of that prison of a body we built for you. You'll be *ours*. And then...the fun...will *really* begin."

"Never," August said between clenched teeth.

Sakla tilted his head from the left to the right with an amused smile.

"You...*will*, August," Sakla said, a slow smile creeping across his

face. “Everyone does...eventually. That's...just the way it is. Besides...I have been *watching* you. Long...before you even knew...your own *name*. I'm *all* you will *ever* have, August. You *belong*...to *me*. Remember...I told you that when you were seven? You used to be scared *shitless* of me, every night...checking in your closet...and under your bed...to make sure I *wasn't* there before you went to sleep. I was there though...*every* night. You just...could never...see me.”

August's eyes widened while staring at Sakla.

“When I was seven?” August said in a low voice.

Sakla let out a breathed laugh and smiled.

“Yeah, you remember?” Sakla asked. “The symbols...they're *Sumerian*.”

“You?” August said in almost a whisper. “You're *him*?”

“Yup, I am,” Sakla replied, “I—”

Sakla stopped as August took small, slow steps back from him with a deep frown.

“Oh, come on, August,” Sakla said, his voice taking on a slow, unexpected cadence. “Don't tell me...you're *still* that seven-year-old kid...but just in an adult body. Still afraid to face your *father*.”

August stopped and clenched his jaw with briefly squinted eyes.

“You are not my father.”

“Sure I am,” Sakla responded. “Anyway, as I said, everyone comes our way eventually, even that pathetic, Jesus freak asshole whom you think is your father. Yeah, he came our way too.”

August's eyes widened, and Sakla mockingly widened his eyes as well with an amused smile.

“Oh yeah, your—sperm donor daddy came to The Summerland,” Sakla said, his voice rising in an odd pitch. “Oh, and he was so hurt that he wasn't in his precious, little biblical heaven...eating milk and honey and walking streets of *gold* with Jesus! You should've seen his face when he discovered that the god he was serving...was *really* me! I made that

bitch get on his *knees*, and I gave him the ultimatum to kiss my fucking feet or face having me rip his fucking *limbs* from his body and *swallow* them right in front of him!"

As Sakla burst into laughter, tears filled August's eyes, and his face turned red. He knew Sakla was trying to say everything he could to make him angry.

"You're going to try to help him too, August?" Sakla asked with a smile and a single raise of his brows.

"Get out—"

"Oh wait," Sakla interrupted, "you can't help him because he's already been *devoured*."

August slightly shook his head.

"What are you talking about?" August asked.

Sakla looked down and giggled as he walked closer to August.

"August, when his IS-BE was beginning to disintegrate because it could no longer incarnate, we *fucking ate* what was left of it. Every part of it...his eyes, his ears, his nose, his chest—me, my reptilians, my draconians, all of us—we feasted, and it was *good*! It could've used more seasoning, but your daddy has always been *more* than a little fucking bland anyway, so—there's *that*. You, however...I can tell from the strong rage deep inside you...that your IS-BE is seasoned *just right*."

As Sakla laughed again, tears streamed from August's eyes. August could feel his insides warming up and his heart rate increasing.

"No, you're lying," August said tearfully with a slight shake of his head, "you can't kill an IS-BE."

"No, you've got a point there, but you can certainly feast on one," Sakla sneered, a wicked grin spreading across his face.

Suddenly, a massive, undulating blue light flickered to the right of August, revealing a horrifying scene: his father, Luke, sprawled on the ground in The Summerland, writhing in agony as Enki and a horde of reptilians, draconians, and other archons viciously tore into his flesh,

ripping off his limbs with brutal efficiency.

“*Help!*” Luke’s Irish-accented voice pierced the air, filled with desperate sobs. “Help me! Someone! *Please! Please!*”

August’s eyes widened in terror, and tears clouded his eyes again as he stepped backward from the ghastly vision. A chilling wave swept over him, freezing him to the core. He gasped in horror as he watched Enki and the others consume Luke piece by piece until nothing remained.

“No, no!” August shouted, his voice cracking with anguish.

As the horrific vision faded, Sakla erupted into laughter, clapping his hands in delight.

“I must say, August, aside from one little detail, that was one of the most *exquisite* IS-BEs we’ve ever indulged in. It seems the more fervent the believer, the more *delectable* they are, wouldn’t you agree?”

Sakla chuckled again while August glared at him with his fists clenched in fury.

“So, no,” Sakla continued, “you won’t be rescuing Daddy, August, because he’s now a part of us—*forever*. So, let’s see, I took your wife and child from you, and now you know that the man whom you call—dad, I took him from you and devoured *him* too! Holy *shit!* Aww, August, I know that’s gotta hurt like a son of a bitch, which essentially means *more loosh energy for me!*”

Sakla laughed heartily as August shook his head, and more tears filled his eyes.

“*Why!*” August shouted tearfully. “Why are you *doing* this? Why—why have you been *doing* all of this to me?”

Sakla laughed as he walked closer to August and smiled proudly.

“It’s simple, because I *can*.”

August stared at Sakla with a clenched jaw before taking his fist and landing a brutal punch squarely on Sakla’s jaw, sending Sakla reeling back several feet. Sakla, cradling his jaw, let out a mocking laugh.

"See? You should join us, August," he grinned. "Together, we could be—absolutely epic!"

With a furious shout, August lunged at Sakla again, but Sakla thrust his hand forward before August could close the distance. A crackling, electric blue beam shot from Sakla's palm and slammed into August's chest, hurling him backward into the wall. The impact echoed through the air as August yelled in agony, collapsed to the ground, and succumbed to a fit of coughing.

"Come on, August," Sakla taunted, a smirk plastered on his face as he approached. "You *really* don't want to take this any further with me...especially not in *this realm*—unless you've lost your *fucking mind*."

Sakla shed his facade instantly, revealing his true form—Enki. He stood tall and imposing, bare-chested, draped in a flowing white toga that hung from one shoulder. His long, white hair and beard sparkled with golden rings, while his chalky skin was adorned with shimmering scales. Gold rings adorned his fingers, and thick cuffs etched with Sumerian symbols encircled his arms. As August rose to his feet, his jaw clenched, and his nostrils flared, he launched a punch at Enki, fueled by rage.

Before the punch could connect with Enki's face, Enki grabbed August's fist and crushed the bones in his hand, resulting in August yelling while dropping to his knees. With haste, Enki grabbed August by the throat and lifted him off his feet and in the air with one hand, resulting in August gasping with widened eyes. As August punched at Enki's arm, trying to get it from around his throat, August's face turned bright red, and every vein in his forehead became visible. Burning pain swirled around in August's head.

Enki punched August hard in the stomach with a smile before tossing him like a rag doll out of the living room. August's body flew into his hallway stairs banister, breaking the banister down. As August lay on his stomach on the stairs with the corner of his forehead bleeding, he

groaned loudly and grabbed hold of his cramping stomach that felt as if it were being stabbed repeatedly; his throat felt as if it were burning in fire.

"See, I *told* you didn't want to do this with me," Enki said as he walked to the stairway. "No one *ever* heeds my warnings."

As August slowly and painfully crawled up the stairs, Enki charged towards August like a raging bull, and slammed his foot down onto August's back with a sickening thud. August's loud cry of agony was music to Enki's ears, a twisted symphony of suffering. With a cruel laugh, Enki seized August by the legs in an attempt to yank him back down the steps as if he were nothing more than a rag doll.

"No, *no*!" August shouted, his breaths ragged and desperate.

August grabbed hold of a shattered banister pole, fighting for his life against the relentless pull of Enki's grip.

"Oh, what's the matter, August?" Enki taunted, a sinister grin plastered across his face. "You don't want to play anymore?"

With a maniacal chuckle, Enki yanked harder and the splintered pole gave way under strain, sending August tumbling down towards him in a chaotic flurry. Before August could muster any defense, Enki slammed him on his back against the stairs, the impact forcing a cry of pain from August. In a flash, Enki stooped down beside him, and with a swift motion, he pinned August's arms down, binding his wrists to the floor with a thick, shimmering electric wire that seemed to materialize from the very air around them.

"Get this damn thing off me!" August shouted tearfully through heavy breaths while struggling immensely to get free. "Get it *off* me, goddamn it!"

"Aww, poor August," Enki cooed in a mocking, sympathetic tone while lifting a strand of August's hair out of his tearful eyes. "You're not enjoying our little fight here? I mean, come on. Did you *really* think you could stand a chance against me?"

Enki's laughter rang out like a malevolent bell as he delivered a savage punch to August's stomach, resulting in August yelling out. Enki laughed before delivering another hard punch that connected with August's face, causing August to yell out again as blood splattered from his mouth.

"I *created* you, boy," Enki sneered, a cruel grin spreading across his face. "Not your fucking pathetic, piece of shit sperm daddy, I did. I know every sorry little move you'll ever make. You'll never defeat me, ever in your miserable, worthless IS-BE *existence*. You're just a flicker of light while I am a *god*!"

With more tears clouding his eyes, August defiantly spat in Enki's face, only to be met with a chilling laugh.

"Ah, there's that rage again!" Enki taunted while wiping away the saliva. "You want to see *my* rage?"

Enki's eyes blazed with a hellish intensity, and with a thunderous roar that shook the very walls of the house, Enki seized August by the throat, lifted him effortlessly off the stairs, and threw him over onto the hallway floor with strong force, resulting in August letting out a pained yell. Before he could even attempt to get up, Enki approached him.

"Your rage could *never* match mine, August," Enki jeered, his voice dripping with malice.

As August struggled to rise on all fours, Enki stomped his foot down hard on his back and then kicked him in his stomach, causing August to cry out, the sound raw and desperate as a jolt of stabbing, burning agony coursed through him like fire. As August slowly tried to crawl away towards the front door, Enki laughed.

"Aww, come on, August, you're making this too easy," Enki mocked, his grin widening as he delivered a brutal kick to August's stomach, eliciting another cry from August.

August stopped crawling and rolled over on his side in the fetal position while clutching his stomach and groaning in despair. He longed

to rise and fight back, but it felt as if every ounce of strength had been drained from his body. As he rolled onto his stomach, desperately trying to push himself up, Enki descended upon him, straddling his back and yanking his head back into a vice-like chokehold. Tears blurred August's vision as he coughed and gagged, clawing at Enki's arm in a futile attempt to escape. The pressure in his head intensified, a searing burn coursed through him. Enki leaned in with a twisted grin spreading across his face.

"So, what's your next move, August? Huh?" Enki taunted before letting out a disembodied laugh. "You're nothing but a pathetic little IS-BE *bitch*, just like that fucking pathetic bible-toting Luke was. If you take away *one* thing from this, August, let it be this—you will never, *ever* win in a fight with me."

With brutal force, Enki slammed August's head into the unforgiving wooden floor, the sickening thud echoing through the room as August went unconscious. Enki stood up, brushed off his hands as if he'd just swatted a fly, and whistled a carefree tune while striding down the hallway and then vanishing into thin air. Moments later, August gasped; his eyes snapped open wide as he lifted his head; confusion flooded his mind.

He sat up, bewildered, and examined his body, astonished to find all his pain had vanished as if it had never existed. *Am I dead?* The soft whistling outside his front door pulled him from his thoughts. Frowning, he got to his feet, opened the door, and his eyes widened. In front of him stretched an immense, lush field under a brilliant blue sky, a colossal orange sun hung overhead.

The homes that once filled his neighborhood had vanished without a trace. He walked into the field but halted abruptly as a tall, slender Irish woman appeared a few feet away, her long, fiery red hair cascaded down her back and her green eyes glimmered like precious emeralds. She wore a flowing white gown, radiating a golden aura that

seemed to pulse with an otherworldly energy.

“Who are you?” August asked with a frown. “Where am I?”

With a smile, the woman walked closer to him and nodded.

“I’m Alastriona, a protector of all people, both mortal and immortal,” the woman said in a soft, slightly echoing voice and with an Irish accent.

August nodded before looking around and then up at the sky.

“Where are we?”

“Mag Mell,” Alastriona replied while briefly glancing up at the sky with a smile, “the realm of health, abundance, and joy.”

“Did you put me through astral projection to bring me here?” August asked.

“I did,” Alastriona replied, “August, you were tricked into your current incarnation. Do you know that?”

“Of course,” he replied with a slight shake of his head, “everyone on Earth was. The reincarnation trick tricked everyone into coming to Earth.”

“Yes, but August, now that you are on Earth, you have been called and chosen. You’ve been chosen to be a leader of people—all people.”

August raised a brow and slightly tilted his head.

“What do you mean?”

“August,” Alastriona said as he led him further across the field, “not only do Noah and Jack need you, but everyone else in The Summerland does as well. They need you to help them *see* that they *can* fight evil, *defeat* it, and then *free themselves*. Myself and others have tried, through whispers and thought implantation, to empower them, but our actions aren’t strong or direct enough to penetrate all the way through for them to listen. We can’t break through to that realm because it’s on a lower frequency that we can’t directly access, but *you can*.”

August stopped and sighed with a frown while looking down and

shaking his head.

“Enki and his—*archons*, they blocked me from astral projecting to The Summerland though,” August said, “I don’t know how, but they have, and then I just got beaten almost to a *pulp* by Enki in my own living room. So, I—I don’t know what else I can do.”

“You have to remember your pledge,” Alastriona said as she took hold of his hands and stared into his eyes.

August slightly shook his head and frowned with a brow raised.

“My pledge?” he asked.

Nodding with a smile, Alastriona pressed her pointer and middle finger to the center of his forehead. As he closed his eyes, a glittery, golden glow spiraled around in circles in the center of his forehead—

As a bright, golden light exploded into golden dust and then evaporated away, August saw himself sitting in a radio station behind a mic and across from an older man.

“So, how exactly can one escape this—reincarnation trick after death, August?” the man asked. “How can we prepare *now* to resist it when we die?”

“Well,” August responded, “that’s a great question, first of all. So, a person has to be aware that there is even a trick in the first place, and then they have to be willing to let go of *all* of their earthly, material attachments.”

The older man frowned and slightly tilted his head to the side.

“What does that *mean*? What do you mean attachments?”

“Well, take me for instance,” August responded, “I’m an author, a former professor, and a researcher. I have a *very* nice home, four bedrooms, four baths. I drive a twenty-twenty-five BMW Gran Coupe—that’s a pretty damn nice car. I’m not bragging because bragging is ego, and having an ego is absolutely toxic. However, what I’m saying is that all the hard work that I put in over the years has allowed me to have

some great things. So, I have a *great* life. However, I can easily give all of that up at the drop of a hat and leave this matrix planet called Earth behind because those things mean *nothing* to me. I mean, sure it's great to have them, and I'm *gifted* to have them—"

"*Gifted?*" the older man said with a frown.

"Yup, *gifted*," August replied, "see, I've been learning to be careful with the words I use because words are spells. So instead of saying blessed—because blessed, when you break the word down, means *be less*, be less than you are, I say *gifted*. In my life, I've been extremely *gifted*."

"Hmm," the older man replied, "that is very interesting to know."

"Yeah," August continued, "so I'm gifted to have the things that I do, *but* if ever there's a time for me to leave this Earth and leave the matrix completely, I will leave *everything* I have here and go—"

"No questions asked?" the man asked.

"No questions asked," August repeated. "In fact, even if I knew there was a *calling* I had, for me to do something bigger and greater than I'm doing now, on the other side, in the afterlife, I'd do the exact same thing. I'd leave everything behind and go without hesitation."

"Wow, and that's what you mean by attachments?" the man asked.

"That's *precisely* what I mean," August replied. "I *love* the things I have, sure, but I can't become so attached to them that when the time comes for me to leave, I hesitate on leaving or decide to try to find some way to fight leaving because then *that's* what would set me up to be pulled like a *magnet* right into that reincarnation trick. When the time comes for you to go, you have to detach yourself from *everything* and even *everyone*, and just go."

"Wow," the man replied.

"Yeah, so when my time comes," August continued, "I'll leave, and when I do, I'll make it a mission to one—never, ever return down here

ever again, and then two, to free as many people who have been victims of the trick as well on the other side as possible.”

“Wow,” the man said with a smile and a nod, “you’re very inspiring, August, very inspiring indeed—”

With a loud gasp, August shot open his eyes, widened them, and then gaped at Alastriona. Alastriona smiled.

“Do you remember now?” Alastriona asked. “August, you *do* have a calling. Your calling is to help the IS-BEs of The Summerland free *themselves*, and with circumstances the way they are, you must abide by your pledge to do so.”

August looked away with briefly widened eyes while exhaling a loud breath. Although he made that pledge eight months ago, he never thought he’d have to actually carry it out.

“What happens if I don’t?” August asked with a brow raised.

“What will happen to the IS-BEs of The Summerland?”

Alastriona looked away and frowned.

“They’ll very soon be locked into a new, simulated prison realm, *permanently*.”

August looked away again and shook his head with a frown.

“Not just the IS-BEs of The Summerland either, August,”

Alastriona continued, “but every IS-BE here on Earth as well, including you. IS-BE’s living and deceased, in physical form, will be forcefully thrust into this new AI-controlled prison realm, where they will be tortured for what will seemingly be an eternity.”

August shot his eyes up at her and briefly widened them upon hearing this.

“Why *me* though?” August asked with a brow raised and a frown.

“That sounds like hesitation, August,” Alastriona said softly while looking to the side with a smirk.

“It’s *not* hesitation,” August said in a firm, sharp tone, “I just—I

want to know—why me? Out of everyone else on this planet, why *me*?”

Alastriona smiled and slightly tilted her head while briefly raising her brows and staring at him.

“There are other prison realms in this matrix that need protectors, August. You aren’t the only one. However, for *The Summerland*, you were specifically *called* and you were specifically *chosen*. In fact, to be perfectly honest, you’ve *always* been chosen for *all* of your life. Now it’s just time for you to realize it and accept it. August, Enki won the fight with you in the earthly realm, but once you cross over, you *will* be more *powerful* than him, and you *can* defeat him—”

With a sharp intake of breath, August’s eyes shot open as he lay sprawled across the cold, unforgiving floor of his hallway. Pain, a relentless, searing entity, pulsed through his back, each heartbeat a reminder of his physical agony. Groaning, he managed to pull himself up into a sitting position, the world around him tilting dangerously as he did so. As August struggled to get to his feet, he uttered another faint, pained groan. With a limp, he made his way towards the stairway. However, midway, he found himself forced to pause, heavily supporting himself against the wall as a surge of vertigo took hold, making the corridor whirl in a dizzying spectacle before his eyes.

Slowly, painstakingly, he made his way into the bathroom in his bedroom, where he slowly sat down onto the edge of the tub with another faint, pained moan. There, in the solitude of his pain, he closed his eyes and conjured the image of his father from the photograph on his living room mantle—a man he never got the chance to meet. The words of Enki echoed hauntingly in his ears: *so, no, you won’t be rescuing Daddy, August, because he’s now a part of us—forever.*

Tears, unbidden and uncontrollable, clouded his vision as he opened his eyes. Instinctively, he tried to blink them back, the phantom echo of his uncle’s voice barking in the back of his mind that *real* men

didn't break, and that if they *did* break, they were being weaklings, sissies. For a fleeting second, he tried to tighten his jaw and reclaim that mask of iron, but the weight of the realization was simply too heavy to carry, the realization that he had been robbed of the chance to know his father in life, and *now*, any hope of meeting him in the afterlife had been cruelly and *permanently* snatched away.

The sorrow was compounded by the hurtful knowledge that this was the second time Enki had attacked him, this encounter being far more brutal than the last. As he sat there, the tears flowed freely from his eyes, each one a testament to his shattered hopes and the acute sense of hurt and loss that enveloped him. It was in this moment of utter despair that the truth of Alastriona's words finally hit him—he *did* have a calling, a purpose that transcended his own desires and fears. Whether he liked it or not, he was *compelled* to answer to it.

Through the veil of his tears, August understood that the path ahead was one of conflict and sacrifice. To liberate the IS-BEs from their chains of eternal servitude, he would have to wage war against Enki, his legion of reptilians, archons, and draconians. And to stand a chance, he knew he had to venture into the unknown, he had to cross over to the other side.

As the evening shadows deepened, August limped into his homeless rehab shelter, pausing in the entryway to stifle a groan that escaped from him. His hand pressed firmly against the aching expanse of his lower back was a reminder of the brutal encounter with Enki that still lingered in his muscles. Hours had passed, yet the pain in his stomach, back, and legs felt as fresh as the moment it had begun. He rubbed the sore spot in slow, deliberate circles, trying to ease the tension before taking a deep breath and steeling himself to walk into the main lobby, forcing his walk to appear less pained than it was.

However, he briefly and faintly whimpered with a deep frown as he approached the front desk. There he spotted Tiffany, his administrative assistant, engaged in a phone conversation. The moment she caught sight of him, her cheeks flushed a delicate pink, her eyes sparkled with warmth, and a radiant smile broke across her face. It was a familiar sight, one he had grown accustomed to each time he entered the shelter; he could feel the strong, undeniable pull of her attraction to him, as palpable as the ache in his body.

“August,” Tiffany said in an almost high-pitched tone while taking her hair down from its ponytail and brushing it on her shoulders, “you aren’t supposed to be here today, but I’m glad you are. How’s your day going?”

August briefly looked away and nodded with a faint, brief smile.

“It’s—been a challenging day, to say the least. Um, can I talk to you in my office for a moment?”

“Sure,” she said while standing up and walking around the desk.

As he walked into his office with her following behind, he closed the door behind her. As she sat on a loveseat near his desk, he lightly pulled over a chair in front of her. Slowly attempting to sit, he frowned and stopped halfway down as he felt a sharp pain shoot up his back, but he quickly forced the frown off his face. He didn’t want Tiffany to see him in pain. Finally sitting all the way down, he exhaled with a brief close of his eyes. He leaned forward and took both her hands into his, and despite him staring down at the floor, he could feel her eyes on him, sparkling with hope that he was about to make some kind of romantic gesture towards her.

“Uh—oh, my God, August, what happened to your neck?” she asked with slightly widened eyes.

He looked up at her with a brief frown before touching his neck. He could feel thick bruising. He rolled his eyes and sighed. Before coming to the shelter, he stopped at a CVS and bought concealer to hide

the bruises on his face, but in his rush to get to the shelter, he forgot to use it on his throat. Briefly closing his eyes, he shook his head.

"It's nothing," August replied in a low voice. "Look, I need you to focus, okay? There's something important that I want to talk to you about right now."

Tiffany slightly tilted her head and stared at him with a brow raised and a brief frown for a few seconds before shaking her head and sighing softly.

"Okay, go ahead, August," she said, her voice carrying a dejected melody as if each word was a note in a somber song.

"Tiffany, I want you to think back to about—eight months ago," August began, his voice a low tone, "back to when I came into the shelter and we were talking about the reincarnation trick and about how attachments would keep us all coming back here. Do you remember?"

Tiffany's expression darkened with a frown for a few seconds before she nodded. The memories flooded back, tinged with the melancholy of hindsight.

"Yeah—yeah, I remember."

August nodded, his eyes briefly meeting hers.

"Good. Now, do you remember what I told you about the pledge I made that day?"

Tiffany's gaze drifted upwards as she searched her memory, a brief silence hanging between them before she nodded again.

"Yeah," she said, "you made a pledge that day that when the time called for you to leave this realm, for whatever reason, without hesitation, you would leave."

"Right," August said softly.

As Tiffany stared at him, he looked up at her, slightly tilted his head to the left, and raised a brow, and in that silent exchange, volumes were spoken. Tiffany's eyes slowly filled with tears, a sense of dread enveloping her. She shook her head in denial.

"No," she said tearfully, "August, no—"

"Tiffany, I have to," he interrupted, his voice strained as if each word was a battle, "there's something I *have* to do on the other side. I can't say no to it—"

"Yeah, but August, what about what you have *here*?" she asked through her tears. "What about your center here? Your writing career, your friends, your family, the ones who love you, *everyone* who loves you."

The depth and the meaning of her plea were evident; her words were laced with a profound sense of loss. Standing up, he pulled her into a warm hug as her body trembled with sobs, a poignant goodbye in every tear shed.

"Please don't do this, August," she sobbed. "You don't have to do this—"

"Yes, I do, Tiffany," he whispered, his own voice betraying the emotion he had tried to conceal, "I don't have a choice; it's what I've been chosen to do."

Despite still keeping one arm snug around her waist, he slightly pulled away and caressed the side of her face before wiping away her tears, a tender gesture amidst the pain.

"Can't you do—whatever it is that you have to do from here?" Tiffany asked, desperation tinting her voice.

August shook his head silently with a faint frown. Tiffany briefly looked away as tears continued to stream, followed by her sighing loudly with a shake of her head.

"Tiffany, it's not forever," he said, his own eyes now lightly glistening with tears. "It's just—until I see you again. My mother will be taking over the CEO operations of the center, and I'm making you the center's program director."

"Does she know?" Tiffany asked, her voice a whisper of fear and sadness.

August looked away, the weight of his decision pressing down on him. After a moment, he sighed deeply, a sound of resignation and sorrow.

"Not yet," he admitted, his voice barely audible.

"August, please," she pleaded, "please don't go. I—I never said it before because I could never find the right words, but I—"

"Tiffany," he cut in softly, "you don't have to say it. I already know."

There was a warmth in his voice, a tenderness in his gaze, but it was careful—soft, but not inviting more.

"I—I do want to—"

August stopped and briefly closed his eyes before faintly frowning as he felt a surge of emotions overwhelm him. Tears clouded his eyes, blurring his vision. His frown deepened, and he swallowed hard, struggling to contain the storm of feelings that threatened to burst forth. With a loud exhale, he tried to regain some semblance of control, clearing his throat. He shook his head as if to dispel the overwhelming sadness before finally forcing himself to look back at her as tears streamed.

"I do want to thank you though," he managed to say, his voice thick with emotion, barely above a whisper, "for *everything*, for helping me transform this place into a sanctuary for so many. But most of all, I want to thank you for being the unwavering friend that I've had the honor of standing beside through it all. You've given me strength when I had none left. Your heart—it's—something *rare*. You're someone I'll always carry with me, no matter where I go, Tiffany, and I *promise* I will *never* forget you."

He kissed her softly on the cheek and offered her a smile, one that was warm yet so full of sorrow, before letting go of her and turning to walk away. As he walked out, leaving a silence that seemed to echo the end of an era, Tiffany collapsed into the loveseat, her own tears flowing

freely now.

"I'll never forget you either, August. I love you," she whispered into the void he left behind, her voice a low, tearful echo.

Walking back into his house, a heavy air of resignation enveloping him, August walked to the kitchen. Pausing for a heart-heavy few seconds, he reached for the phone on the wall and dialed. With each ring, knotted flutters of dread and sorrow filled his stomach, a silent prelude to the storm of emotions threatening to break free.

"Hello?" came Victoria's voice, a beacon of warmth in the cold dread that had taken hold of August.

Merely hearing her voice, a familiar sound that had always been a source of comfort, now unraveled him. August took the phone away from his ear as tears blurred his vision. He gazed down, unable to even face the phone that connected him to her. His frown deepened, and he bit down hard on his lower lip, a desperate attempt to stifle the sobs clawing their way up his throat.

"Hello?" Victoria's voice echoed again, tinged with confusion and concern. "Honey bunny, is that you?"

The endearment, so full of love and memories, was too much. Tears broke free and streamed from his eyes, and a few sobs escaped from him as he fought for composure. After a few seconds, with a deep, shuddering breath, August managed to bring the phone back to his ear.

"Yeah, mom, hi," he spoke tearfully in a low, quivering voice.

Silence greeted him, a heavy, expectant pause as Victoria surely pieced together the quivering in his voice, the unspoken distress. Clearing his throat, August forced strength into his voice, an attempt to mask his turmoil.

"Hi, Mom," he repeated, the words stronger but the pain no less

diminished.

"What's wrong, August?" Victoria's voice, now laced with worry, pierced him.

"Nothing, um, look, I need you to come here at—"

He stopped as he glanced at the clock, the ticking, a reminder of the fleeting moments he had left.

"Eight o'clock tonight, okay?"

The confusion and concern in her voice were palpable.

"Honey, that's four hours from now. You want me to just make my way there now—"

"No," he interjected strongly, a sense of finality in his voice, "no, eight o'clock. When you get here, just use your key. I'll be in my car in the garage."

The silence that followed was thick with unasked questions, worry, and fear.

"August—"

"Mom—*please*, okay?" his broken voice said, the plea almost a whisper as tears clouded his vision once more.

"Okay," she conceded, her voice light but tense.

"Mom, I love you—so very much," August said, his voice barely audible as he choked on his emotions.

Taking the phone from his ear, he looked up and away while biting down on his lower lip, frowning and breaking into silent sobs before putting the phone back to his ear.

"I love you more than words could ever express," he said tearfully. "God, how I love you, *always* remember that."

"August, wait—"

But he couldn't wait; he couldn't bear another second of her worries, questions, and love that he felt he was betraying. He hung up, the click of the phone a sharp, final sound in the quiet kitchen. Leaning his forehead against the phone, he let go; sobs wracked his body, a

physical manifestation of the inner turmoil and pain. Every part of him ached with the weight of leaving her. After several heart-wrenching seconds, he forced himself to move and pen down the words that he couldn't say out loud. Sitting at the kitchen table, he wrote with a shaky hand, each word a testament to his love, his regret. Placing the notepad in the center of the table, a silent message left to be discovered, he got up and walked to his garage, each step forward heavier than the last, weighed down by the enormity of his emotions and the finality of his decision.

August stepped into the garage. The single fluorescent tube above sputtered and hummed, casting long, frantic shadows that danced across the concrete like restless spirits. He seized a roll of thick silver duct tape from the shelf. The motion was not hurried, but monkishly precise. He was sealing the past, and with every strip, he was actively shedding his former physical self. Starting with the high, small window, he tore off strips—long, ragged pulls—and pressed them down with fierce, meticulous force until not a sliver of the oppressive outside light could bleed in. The entire garage door followed, every crack and seam smothered beneath layers of cold, weathered adhesive, ensuring absolute finality.

While his hands executed the mundane, sealing the exterior world, a far more profound *unsealing* was occurring within his mind. August was tearing away the anchors of his identity: his name, his age, his birthday, and the artificial construct of his race. The physical vessel, the Caucasian skin he was born into, the label of “August Cameron”—all were becoming irrelevant static. His mind settled into a resonant, cold clarity. He whispered the words aloud, not as a statement of belief, but as an *absolute declaration of truth*.

“I'm no longer thirty-nine year old August Cameron, or *any* human-created label. I am an IS-BE, an *Immortal Spiritual Being*, a *powerful*, infinite light being of the *universe*. This body is a temporary

vehicle, and this identity is now *dust*.”

As he finished covering the door, in the manufactured darkness, the duct tape felt less like an adhesive barrier and more like a *chrysalis*; he was sealing his old self inside so he could emerge as the pure, unburdened consciousness that he knew himself to be. Moving to his BMW Gran Coupe, he opened the driver’s door and began to seal the interior, his actions a chilling parody of weatherproofing. Windows first: the tape pulled taut and smooth, covering the glass until the world outside became a blurred memory.

Then the vents—every slat vanishing beneath the suffocating silver, trapping the existing air, making it finite. He ran a final strip over the small gap where the door met the frame. Climbing inside, he took a deep breath; the scent of new tape was sharp, mingling with the ghosts of journeys past. He reached for the start button, its smooth surface a grotesque invitation. With a slow exhale, he pressed it. The engine whispered to life, a soft, metallic purr that felt like fate closing its hand. August tapped the large central screen of the car’s infotainment system. The screen woke, and without hesitation, the very first notes began: the elegant, iconic sweep of violins that introduced “Bitter Sweet Symphony” by The Verve.

The music filled the car—loud enough to be undeniable, yet somehow soft and enveloping, a cinematic soundtrack for August’s final, private act. The simple, cyclical rhythm of the opening strings was a melancholic promise of transcendence, resonating perfectly with his identity as an IS-BE now leaving the limitations of his human life behind. The carbon monoxide began its work immediately—silent, odorless, the perfect executioner. It seeped from the tailpipe, a stolen, poisoned breath flooding the sealed space. August reclined his seat back, closed his eyes and forced his mind away from the physical environment that he was in and toward the vision he desperately craved. He envisioned *Pleroma*. A beach stretched out before him, pristine white sand

glistening like powdered diamonds under a hyper-real yellow sun. The ocean was a vast, blinding expanse of liquid blue, its waves not crashing, but sighing gently against the shore. Behind him stood a magnificent, three-story beach house, its white walls and expansive windows promising tranquility beyond earthly comprehension.

"I'm going home to Pleroma," August said in a strong voice within his mind. "I'm going home to Source, to Amagi, the realm outside of the net grid of the matrix. I'm sovereign. I—a free and powerful IS-BE—am going home to Pleroma, to Source, to Amagi, the realm outside of the net grid of the matrix."

As the words resolved, the gas crept into his lungs, and a strange, dizzying warmth spread through his body. His breaths grew shallow and desperate, each one a struggle lost to the creeping poison. Simultaneously, the music reached its magnificent swell. The looping, gentle violin was suddenly joined by the crash of drums, the pulsing bassline, and the full weight of the orchestra. The simple melody exploded into a powerful, emotionally charged anthem of transcendence.

It felt like a massive, unseen door swinging open—a musical key turning to unlock the vastness of the universe. The climax was a pure, undeniable wave of heroic resolve, flooding the small, sealed confines of the car, while August's mental vision grew sharper: Pleroma was a beacon, pulling him *home*. The rhythm of the waves became a deep, resonant drumbeat—a lullaby for his final departure. With a gentle, final sigh, August's head softly tilted to the side as he surrendered to the afterlife, and the BMW's engine hummed—the last, persistent sound of the world he was leaving behind.

The Afterlife

The hum of the BMW's engine and the sweeping strings of "Bitter Sweet Symphony" didn't fade; instead, they suddenly felt distant, as if playing from the bottom of a deep well. In a silent, weightless jerk, August felt himself lurch upward. He wasn't breathing anymore, yet he felt more alive than he had in years. Hovering just beneath the garage ceiling, he looked down. Below him, his own lifeless body lay slumped in the driver's seat, head tilted at that final, surrendered angle. The music continued to pulse through the car's speakers, a muffled soundtrack to the shell he had just discarded.

As he stared, his eyes widened in a sudden, jarring realization. He didn't have to turn his head to see the workbench behind him or the door to his left. He possessed an exhilarating 360-degree vision. The entire garage—every cobweb in the corner and his own cooling corpse—was visible to him all at once, a panoramic reality that defied every human law of optics. His eyebrows raised in shock as he processed the sensory overload. Then, a warm, phantom breeze brushed against him, catching his dark brown hair and sweeping it across his face. August turned his focus toward the source of the heat.

Behind him, the dull grey walls of the garage had dissolved into a spectacular, spiraling tunnel of white light that captivated him with dazzling allure. August immediately felt an overwhelming sense of relaxation wash over him. It was as if an invisible force wrapped around him in a soothing embrace, filling him with a euphoric warmth that resonated through every part of his being. As the tunnel shifted into a vibrant array of colors, waves of pulsating, intense pleasure surged through him, amplifying his ethereal experience. Standing at the mouth of this shimmering brilliance was a figure designed to radiate peace. He was a tall man with shoulder-length, curly brown hair, clad in a

sparkling, white flowing robe that seemed woven from starlight. A soft golden glow emanated from him like a halo, casting a warm, inviting light across the astral void.

“August, welcome,” the man said, his voice a melodic honey that vibrated directly into August’s soul. “I’ve been waiting for you. I know you don’t believe in me, but I surely *do* believe in *you*, and I *love* you, son. Trust me and come with me. An amazing paradise awaits you if you just trust me and come with me.”

The image was perfect. The tone was impeccable, everything felt *warm and loving*. But August knew better. Behind that mask of the “Savior,” he saw the architect of the trick. He saw *Enki*. August didn’t dignify the entity with a verbal response. With a sharp roll of his eyes and a sour, disgusted frown, he felt a surge of cold, sovereign power. *Turn away from the light and Enki!* he commanded in the silence of his mind. Immediately, his astral body snapped around. He turned his back on the iridescent tunnel and the man in the white robe, refusing to give the deception another second of his attention.

He closed his eyes tight, focusing every ounce of his intent on the truth he had discovered: *I’m going to Amagi!* The words vibrated with the force of an iron decree. *I’m going to Amagi! The realm outside of the matrix but inside of Pleroma, the real universe—now!* In a flash of pure, silent intent, August vanished into thin air, leaving the garage behind forever. Seconds later, deprived of its prey, the white tunnel of light flickered and collapsed, and the man in the sparkling robe vanished into the nothingness from which he came.

With a sharp inhale of breath, August fell heavily onto a dark floor beneath him. With a frantic shake of his head, he sprang to his feet, his eyes wide with confusion as he scanned his surroundings. The enveloping darkness gradually morphed into the familiar yet unsettling living room of the Myrtle Beach home he built during his astral projection trips to Amagi. Everything appeared similar—the furniture,

the carpet, the walls—but something was undeniably *off*. The sofa had taken on a grimy, muted shade of white, far removed from the bright, pristine hue he remembered. The once-spotless white walls bore faint stains that resembled blood and dirt. As August peered through the large rectangular windows, his brow furrowed at the overcast sky, where he could make out grotesque faces lurking among the clouds.

This can't be my home! The air was thick with the unmistakable fragrance of rose, sandalwood, and jasmine—a scent that struck a chord deep within him. Drawn by the sound of running water, he made his way to the kitchen, where he found Samantha at the sink, diligently washing dishes. Tears welled in his eyes, his heart raced, and a lump formed in his throat. He could hardly believe the sight before him. As August called out her name, his voice trembled with emotion, barely above a whisper.

“Samantha?” he said in a soft voice.

Samantha looked up at him with her radiant smile.

“Good morning,” she greeted, her voice tinged with a playful curiosity. “I’ve been waiting for you to wake up.”

As she approached him, the space between them charged with anticipation; she wrapped her arms around him, drawing him closer. Their lips touched, initially soft and probing, but the gentleness quickly morphed into a fiery, all-consuming passion. It felt like a dormant volcano awakened within August; his feelings blended into a passionate surge of longing and desire. The kiss deepened, each moment intensifying, as if he were trying to communicate every unspoken feeling through that single act. However, just as the fervor reached its peak, August, with gentle firmness, eased her back. Their foreheads pressed together, a silent testament to the storm of emotions that had just passed between them. His eyes were a mixture of desire and turmoil, reflecting the intense reunion they had just shared and the complexity of emotions it unearthed.

“I’ve missed you so much,” August confessed tearfully.

"I know, love," she whispered back, her voice a soft caress. "I've missed you too. It's been—"

Suddenly, August recoiled and roughly pushed her away, a look of wide-eyed, raised brows shock crossing his features.

"What's wrong, love?" Samantha inquired, her frown deepening, a shadow of concern flitting across her face.

August shook his head while staring at her with a deep frown. The realization hit him like a bolt of lightning—the woman before him, despite her familiar smile, voice, and touch, was a stranger. Her eyes, once a warm, comforting brown, now shimmered a striking royal blue.

"You're not Samantha," he declared, his voice cold, starkly contrasting to the warmth that had just enveloped them.

Samantha's frown deepened into a perplexed scowl, her laughter echoed hollowly in the room.

"August, what are you talking about? Of course, I'm Samantha—"

But August was adamant, his heart sank with the truth.

"You're *not*! Samantha *never* called me love! She always called me sweetheart or—or *honey*, and she *never* called me August. She always called me by my *last* name! Her eyes—and her eyes were *brown*, *not* royal blue—you're not *her*!"

Samantha's smile slowly faded, and as her brows furrowed and her face displayed a sneer, she immediately transformed into Anzu, resulting in August scowling at him.

"You," August said in almost a cold, almost breathy tone. "I know you. I've *researched* you. You're—"

"Anzu," Anzu said with a smile, "the one and only. Welcome, August, welcome back to Amagi, your *beautiful* world that resides within the astral realm of *Pleroma*."

Immediately, as August's eyes widened, the revelation hit August like a lightning bolt. He wasn't in Pleroma, the free universe. He was in the *astral realm*, and no after how many astral projection trips he took

when he was in his physical body, August knew that the astral realm was Enki's realm, it was Enki's turf. August may have been in the afterlife, but he was still in the astral, and the astral was a part of Enki's matrix.

"You're *lying*," August said in a firm, cold tone. "This isn't Amagi, and it sure as hell isn't *Pleroma* either."

A frown appeared on Anzu's face as he slightly tilted his head to the right.

"You don't want to stay here, August?" Anzu asked. "I mean, you *should* want to stay here. After all, you did *build* all of this with that *very* creative mind of yours, and I must say it is *magnificent*, you did an *amazing* job. So—are you sure you don't want to stay? I can even make it so you can stay here with Samantha forever. I could bring her IS-BE back here for you. Just say you agree and—"

"What?" August responded in a sharp tone. "You need me to agree. Wow, now why does that sound so familiar?"

"Oh, *come on, August!*" Anzu said while slightly jumping up and down and pouting. "Why are you being so *hardheaded* about this? Just say, I agree—"

"No!" August yelled, his nostrils flaring. "This is one of Enki's—damn hallucinogenic *tricks*! I'm *not* falling for it! I'm *sovereign*, and I don't *belong* to Enki! I'm not agreeing to *anything*!"

"You *will*!" Anzu shouted, his eyes turning black as marbles.

"I *won't*!" August yelled back.

"August, I swear if you don't agree, I'll—"

"What?" August snapped. "You'll what? You can't do anything to me because I'm *not* Enki's property!"

As Anzu slowly vanished, August slowly exhaled, thinking he was done dealing with Enki's entrapment antics. However, within seconds, he realized he was wrong as he saw several huge, glittery tarantulas crawling all over him, from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. August was beyond frightened of spiders, and he knew that Enki *knew* it.

As the tarantulas covered his entire body, August felt his throat tighten, his stomach cramped with severity, his heart skipped beats, his legs felt numb and tingly, and his entire body felt cold as ice. He wanted so badly to freak out, to panic by swatting all the tarantulas off him and running as far away from the tarantulas as possible, but he knew that if he did that, that would be giving Enki exactly what he wanted—the vibrational loosh energy of *fear*. That fear would then pull August directly into Enki's clutches. August shut his eyes tight while hyperventilating.

"They're not real, they're not real, they're not real, they're not real," August said in a low tone.

After a few seconds, the tarantulas disappeared, and the entire area around him transferred into a snowy wooded scene with August standing in the middle of it. Feeling a strong gush of cold air brush past his face, August shot open his eyes, and with a slight gasp, he looked all around him. He knew he was in another one of Enki's hallucinations, one which had the sole purpose of getting August to cave in and accept the invitation to be a victim of the reincarnation trick.

"It's not going to *work*, Enki!" August shouted with a deep frown.

Immediately after speaking, a huge, barking Doberman Pinscher sprinted over, jumped onto August, and knocked him down to the ground. That was August's second fear—large dogs, specifically German Shepherds, Dobermans, Rottweilers, and Pit bulls. As the Doberman bit down onto August's arms, August yelled out in pain. Instantly, Enki vaporized into appearance, smirking with his arms crossed across his chest. August tried his best to block every bite from the Doberman but failed.

The Doberman was somehow stronger than him, and despite his wanting to, August just couldn't get his mind to focus on his intention so that he could use his abilities to get the dog off him. Sharp, stinging pain shot through every part of his body. That pain was mixed in with him feeling as if he were being stabbed with a thousand sharp knives all over

his body. As the Doberman bit down deep and hard into August's shoulder, August yelled out again.

"This can all be over, August," Enki said while smiling. "All you have to do is say you agree, and it'll be over within the snap of a finger."

As the Doberman sunk his teeth deep down into August's neck and blood splattered everywhere, August yelled out once more, and it was a yell that was mixed with sobs. Dropping his head back, August was about to give up, but then he heard an inner voice—*use your thought intention ability! Use it now, August! Try! Try as hard as you can! Hurry!* August shut his eyes tight as another Doberman rushed over, jumped on top of him, and started biting down on August's outer thigh. *Firespew.* Instantly, gushes of thick, electrifying fire beams shot out of August's eyes, engulfing the Doberman on top of him in flames and throwing the Doberman off him several feet away. Shooting his upper body up off the ground as the fire beams vanished instantly, August shot a weak glare over at the dog biting into his leg.

Eyeshock. Instantly, long, thin, electrifying green light beams shot out of August's eyes and directly into the forehead of the other Doberman. The Doberman wailed loudly as he went flying several feet away from August. With haste, August shot his eyes down at his bleeding arms and legs. *Heal.* Instantly, the bites on August's arms and legs healed and then vanished. He closed his eyes with a frown. *Heal.* Opening his eyes, the wounds on his shoulder and neck closed up and vanished.

"You son of a bitch!" Enki shouted in a demonic voice before bolting towards August.

August jumped to his feet, already anticipating the attack. Enki roared in, throwing a wide, telegraphed haymaker. August moved, almost like liquid, and tilted his head back as the punch whistled past his face by a hair's breadth. August countered with a lightning-fast jab that snapped Enki's head back. Enki stumbled, surprised by the speed, but quickly regained his composure. August weaved through a series of furious

punches from Enki. August blocked a punch with a forearm, the impact sending a jolt up his arm, then slipped away from another, deflecting it with a shoulder roll. He used Enki's momentum against him, a subtle push sending the deity off balance.

As Enki flailed, August exploded upwards, launching himself into the air. Enki's fist whistled harmlessly beneath him as August flipped, landing lightly behind the enraged deity. August launched himself forward, like a blazing comet and drove a spinning kick into Enki's back, the force strong enough to stagger even an immortal. A shower of red electric sparks erupted from Enki's chest with a crackling sound, but he remained standing, albeit swaying slightly. Enki turned, his eyes burning with a rage that could scorch the earth.

"You really think you can take me on again, boy?" Enki taunted. "You remember how it went last time—I wiped the *floor* with you."

August tilted his head and displayed a cold smile. He wasn't even breathing hard. Energy coursed through him, a burning vitality that fueled his every movement.

"Well, I hope you enjoyed that moment because I *promise* it won't end the same way *this time*."

August didn't wait. He moved like a blur, closing the distance in an instant. Enki swung, but August was already gone, a phantom image flickering to the side. August reappeared a fraction of a second later, hammering a series of precise strikes into Enki's pressure points. A jab to the throat, a punch to the solar plexus, a knife-edge chop to the base of the neck. With each blow, more fire and electrical sparks erupted from Enki's chest and mouth, a cascading display of raw power being disrupted. Enki, enraged, clawed at August's throat, but August reacted with preternatural speed. He sidestepped, grabbed Enki's arm, and used his own momentum to send him spinning. He drove a knee into Enki's gut, the impact creating a vacuum of air around them, and sent even more fire and electricity spewing from Enki's chest, Enki roared in agony

and anger, but August didn't stop. He launched himself forward again, and delivered a barrage of punches.

Enki fought back with animalistic fury, but he was slow and clumsy compared to August's calculated precision. Each punch that Enki delivered, August blocked with ease. August rained down the blows – jab, jab, hook and with each punch, fire and electrical sparks erupted from Enki. August had a strange pleasure in seeing Enki bleed out electricity and fire. He grabbed Enki's throat, his grip tightening, cutting off the flow of air. Enki clawed weakly at August's hands.

"Aww, come on, Enki, is that the best you got?" August asked, a laugh escaping from him.

Enki gasped for air, a gurgling sound in his throat, electric sparks and flame flickering at the corners of his mouth.

"You're going to come to me eventually, boy," Enki choked out, a desperate smile twisting his features. "After all, you *belong* to me."

"Never," August spat, nostrils flaring. "I will *never* belong to you."

Enki coughed, a weak laugh bubbling in his chest.

"We shall see," Enki managed to rasp, "see you soon, August."

In an instant, Enki vanished. August's eyes darted around, searching for any sign of his enemy. A cool wind rushed through him, making his body feel slightly chilled. For the moment, he felt his ethereal body relax. He knew the journey he was about to embark on would be his biggest challenge, his toughest battle, and despite him now being determined, August knew that to *win*, he had to be *ready*.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In the snowy, wooded scene where August was, he closed his eyes and slowly exhaled. *I want to go to Amagi, the realm that's outside of the matrix but inside of Pleroma—the real universe—now!* Immediately, he was plunged instantly into a long passage of absolute blackness—a pitch-blackness so profound it felt tactile, like moving through ink. He knew immediately that this was *the void*, the ancient, silent expanse spiritualists spoke of as the threshold between the simulated cage and the true universe. Minutes stretched into what felt like hours. As he hurtled through the darkness, the void began to reveal glimpses of the matrix he was leaving behind. He saw different levels of simulated matrix alternate realities, shimmering like ghost-layers in the dark. They all looked like Earth at first—buildings, trees, cars, and skies filled with clouds—but as he moved deeper, the simulations grew increasingly techno and frighteningly distorted.

Each level was more disfigured than the last; the sky was a bruised, digital purple, and the buildings leaned at impossible, jagged angles. In one particularly harrowing layer, the people walking the streets looked like frightening, disfigured AI robotoids, their movements mechanical and their faces frozen in uncanny, plastic expressions. *Stay calm.* His internal voice echoed against the vast silence. *Show no fear. Don't even look at the matrix realities. Stay focused on getting to Pleroma and Amagi. Stay focused on getting to Amagi and Pleroma.* He tore his gaze away from the disfigured simulations, locking his focus onto the dark void ahead, determined to reach his home without further distraction. The darkness seemed to thicken, pressing against his astral

form, until suddenly, the pressure vanished.

August appeared out of thin air into the living room of his home in Myrtle Beach, nestled in the heart of Amagi. This wasn't a trick of the mind or a fleeting illusion. No, this time, he was genuinely in the comforting embrace of his own afterlife space. The air, thick with the rosemary scent of his home, suddenly carried a cascade of laughter to his ears, light and bubbling with joy emanating from his backyard. With a quizzical brow raised and a hint of intrigue making his eyes sparkle, August moved towards the source. Walking past the kitchen, August looked out a window. The backyard, which was bathed in sunlight, was seemingly empty. Yet, the laughter persisted, now joined by the playful barks of Cooper, the golden retriever he had whimsically thought into existence within his realm.

Stepping into the yard, August was greeted by a scene of a short, slender, biracial little girl. Her presence was enigmatic. With her short, black hair tied in playful pigtails and clad in slightly oversized overalls, she was kneeling in front of Cooper, engaging in what seemed to be a secret exchange filled with laughter and whispers. August had never seen this little girl before, so who was she? More so, how did she get into his realm? While in his created realm, he had thought-manifested into existence business owners and other identified people to occupy the numerous businesses and houses lined up and down the streets around his home. And although he did indeed thought-manifest some children into existence, he never remembered thought-manifesting a little girl who looked like the one he saw before him. When he visited his realm the week prior, he didn't remember anyone else in his realm doing so either. Walking over to the little girl, he stooped down beside her with a brow raised.

"Hey, do I know you?" August inquired.

The little girl glanced up at him, her brow furrowing for a moment before she shook her head.

"No," she answered.

"Then who are you?" August continued. "I'm August, by the way. What's your name? How did you get here?"

"I'm Hazel, and I'm not really sure how I got here. I just showed up after I died."

August squinted a bit and tilted his head slightly.

"How did that happen? You're—so young."

"I was attacked and stabbed one morning while my daddy and I were at a shelter," Hazel replied, her eyes dropping to the ground and her lips forming into a pout.

August's eyes widened. The pieces slammed together with a startling clarity. The shelter. The father. The *attack*. He instantly had an inkling of who her father had to be.

"Hazel—would your dad happen to be Noah by any chance?"

Hazel gasped while glancing up at him with a full smile.

"Yeah! How did you know?"

August stared at her while repeatedly blinking and frowning before briefly closing his eyes and shaking his head.

"Lucky guess, um, is your dad around here by any chance?"

"No," Hazel replied, "I honestly don't know where he is."

August nodded before glancing away briefly.

"Well, where's the rest of your family? Are they still on Earth, or are they—somewhere else?"

"My mommy died already. I don't know where she is either. I don't know where any of my family members are."

August sighed and raised his brow. He couldn't let her wander through his realm alone, even if he knew it was safe because he had created it; she was still a child.

"Okay, well, I'll tell you what," August said, gently taking her hand, which helped her rise to her feet. "How about you and I go to the market? Then you can stay at my home until I figure out some things,

okay?"

"Is that dog yours?" Hazel asked while staring at Cooper.

"Yup, he sure is," August replied.

"As long as I can play with him, I'd love to stay here."

August laughed.

"Good," August replied before walking out of the front yard of his house and down the street with her.

"Will you find out where my mommy is?" Hazel asked, her shoulders slumped and the light in her eyes dimming.

August stopped in his tracks and stared at her with a brow raised again. That would be a challenging feat. After all, besides knowing her name and knowing who her father was, he didn't *really* know her. So how in the hell was he going to find her mother? August nodded with a brief, contrived smile.

"I promise I will," August said, resulting in Hazel flashing a big smile.

"Thank you, August!" Hazel said, and before he could react, she reached up on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his waist in a small, child-like hug.

August smiled softly, amused by the adorable effort.

"You're welcome," he said gently, giving her a warm look and hugging her back in return.

August hoped in his mind that he could fulfill the promise he gave to her for her sake. As he turned the corner, he saw a tall, athletic, black man walking in the opposite direction of him. The man's sights were on everything around him as if everything around him were foreign to him—the street, the cars parked on both sides and the houses and businesses that lined both sides of the street. As soon as the man looked forward and saw August and Hazel, his eyes widened.

"Hazel?" the man exclaimed, stopping in his tracks.

Hazel looked over at the man with widened eyes and a smile that

grew big.

"Uncle Christopher!" Hazel shouted before unlocking her hand from August's, running over to Christopher, and rushing into his arms.

"Hey, kiddo, how did you get here?" Christopher exclaimed as he stooped down in front of her.

"I was stabbed at this shelter Daddy and I were at," Hazel replied in a low, dejected tone.

Christopher's eyes widened as he gaped at her.

"*Stabbed? Shelter?*" Christopher said with a deep frown before shaking his head.

Christopher extended his hand to August as August walked over to him.

"Um—hey, I'm Christopher Anderson. Who are you?"

"I'm August Cameron," August replied while shaking Christopher's hand. "This realm is one I created—"

"You created this?" Christopher exclaimed with widened eyes. "All of this?"

August expressed a breathed laugh while nodding.

"Yeah, I did. I call it Amagi, my own little slice of paradise."

"How though?" Christopher asked. "I mean, how did you create all this?"

"Through intention, *thought* intention to be exact," August replied, "anyway, this being *my* realm is why I'm not sure why or how you two are here in it. I've met every person I put here, but I've never met you two."

"Yeah, I don't—I don't know either," Christopher replied, looking up and around his surroundings. "One minute, I was turning away from the light and going through—what seemed like—*endless* layers of the matrix, and then the next, I'm—*here*."

"That's what happened to me too, Uncle Christopher," Hazel replied.

"Hmm, weird," August replied, "but um—Hazel, how about you run down to the store on the corner and pick out all the tasty food you want, and Uncle Christopher will be down there to join you in a minute?"

"I can pick *anything*?" Hazel asked with a smile.

"Yup, you sure can," August said with a smile, "everything's free here, so just go in and tell the man behind the counter that August sent you in."

"Oh, neat! Thanks, August!" Hazel exclaimed before turning and running down the block.

August watched her with a sad frown.

"I didn't want to say it in front of her, but—her father died too," August said in a low voice.

Christopher's eyes widened.

"Who—wait—Noah? Noah's dead? *How*?"

"He committed suicide not long after Hazel was stabbed," August responded. "He drove his car off a pier and into the ocean."

"Oh my God," Christopher said in almost a whisper. "How do you know this though? Did you know Noah?"

"We—talked a few times," August replied, "if you can call it that. Anyway, Noah is in a place called The Summerland with his father, Jack. It's a terrible prison realm run by Enki and his—archon, draconian, and reptilian beings."

"The *Summerland*?" Christopher said with his brows raised. "Jesus, I've read up on that place. It's like a literal nightmare."

"Yeah," August said, "I had been trying to help Noah's father get a message to Noah before Noah passed. So—anyway, where are you staying around here, Christopher? Because I don't remember manifesting any vacant houses, every house in this realm is occupied."

"Yeah, I just spent the night on the beach not too far from here," Christopher replied.

"Do you know how to manifest within realms using thought

intention?" August asked.

Christopher raised a brow, frowned, and then shook his head.

"No, I must have—missed that part of the—afterlife training or something."

August laughed and then nodded.

"Okay, well, I can tell you all about that later. In the meantime, you and Hazel are both welcome to stay in my home. Just go around the corner and it's the fourth house on the left. It's unlocked because—well, there's no danger in leaving homes unlocked here. I have two guest bedrooms, so make yourselves at home—at least until I come back from *The Summerland* with Jack and Noah."

"Oh wow, that's so nice of you," Christopher said with a smile.

"Thanks, man, we appreciate it."

"Yeah, no problem at all," August said. "Just uh—don't think up anything negative while here. I created this realm to be high vibrational at all times—"

"Yeah, no, of course," Christopher replied with a nod.

"Okay, and I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Yeah, okay, thanks again, August."

August patted Christopher on the arm and then nodded and smiled briefly before walking away.

As August turned down another corner, he closed his eyes and forced himself to picture *The Summerland*. August knew that because he was now in permanent, ethereal form, he could use the invisibility cloak to be there and talk to Jack and Noah. It was an ability he could never use while in human form and through astral projection. *The Summerland*, I want to go to *The Summerland*. Unlike times before when he did astral projection, this time, August said his words with a much stronger

intention, and within seconds, he found himself standing in the large open field park area of The Summerland. He looked all around at the numerous men, women, and children walking around, and then his eyes darted to the open curtain window of Jack's apartment. August squinted before closing his eyes, taking a deep breath in, and then exhaling.

With a deep frown on his face, Jack paced back and forth in the living room of his apartment. He felt his stomach twist in knots, his heart pounded, small beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, and his hands trembled. It was past midnight, yet Jack couldn't sleep. He was too worried about his son being down in the land of Klipoth.

He's probably being ripped apart and tortured in every unimaginable way. Dropping down on the sofa, Jack rocked back and forth with a brief close of his eyes. He had no idea what to do. He didn't even know how to travel to the Land of Klipoth, so he couldn't save Noah. He was helpless, which made his stomach cramp with burning, pressuring pain.

"Jack," August said in a low voice.

Looking up and all around the room, Jack frowned.

"August? Where are you?"

"I'm here. You just can't see me because I'm using the cloak of invisibility ability, which I now have access to."

Jack's expression softened into a smile, followed by a quick, loud exhale.

"Huh, another ability I never knew existed. Anyway, I'm so glad you came back here, August."

"Well, I had to, but it wasn't easy. Enki and his archons blocked me from visiting through astral projection, so—I had to—end my existence to come here."

Jack's eyes widened for a few seconds before he frowned.

"What? Wait, you mean you—you ended your *life*—just to come here and—see *me*?"

"Well, not just to see you but to help you escape, you and Noah both, and the other IS-BEs Enki has enslaved."

Jack looked away with another short, loud exhalation of breath. Blinking repeatedly, he half-smiled and shook his head.

"Wow, I—August, I—if I could see you, I'd probably give you the *biggest* hug right now. I'm forever grateful to you."

August expressed a short, breathed laugh.

"Well, no thanks is needed but—you're welcome. Look—um—I didn't get a chance to reach Noah. He—he died, Jack. You know that though, right—"

"Yeah, I know," Jack cut in while looking away with a frown and briefly closing his eyes.

"He's here though, isn't he?" August asked. "He has to be—"

"He's here," Jack interrupted, "or at least he was until he disobeyed Enki and astral law enforcement by using one of his abilities, and so as punishment, they threw him down to Klipoth."

August slightly gasped. Just the mention of the name Klipoth sent a chill down August's spine.

"August, I don't know what to do," Jack said with a frown. "You know how bad Klipoth is."

"Of course I do. It's the land of nightmares. Hell, it's the origin of every nightmare we *get* when we sleep at night," August said.

"I know," Jack replied, "can't you do something? I can't, but there's gotta be *some* way you can—*please*? August, please you have to because I—"

"All right, all right," August interjected, "I'll help, but does he know the truth now since being up here?"

Jack shook his head with a confused frown.

"The truth?"

"The truth about God, Jesus, Enki, Lucifer, heaven, does he know the truth? Did you tell him already?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, of course I did—"

"And does he believe? Because you know as well as I do that I can't help him to help himself if he doesn't believe."

"I think he does," Jack replied, "I mean, I think he now gets that all the shit he and I once believed in was garbage. I think so, but August, I really need you to *help* him. To think of him being down there is just—wracking my damn mind, and I just *can't*! I've been up *all* night worrying and pleading for someone to help him—"

"Okay, okay, *Jack*. Take a moment and *breathe*," August replied softly. "I'll do what I can if Noah is receptive and will listen."

"Thank—"

"Oh no, don't thank me yet because I might not even succeed in helping him, but—I'll try my hardest. Hey, but look, if this does go well, at some point soon, we three are going to have to discuss you escaping here and then coming back and helping others escape as well. All right?"

Jack clenched his fist and swallowed hard at the thought of escaping The Summerland. In his mind, escaping The Summerland was harder than what he had always heard escaping from Alcatraz was like. However, Jack was willing to say anything to get August to help Noah.

"Sure, sure, yeah, okay," Jack replied.

August sighed.

"Okay, sit tight. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Hey, wait a second," Jack said quickly.

"Yeah."

"August, you are going down to Klipoth to get him yourself, aren't you?" Jack asked, his voice filled with light concern.

"Well, yeah," August said with a nod and a sigh. "That's the only way I *can* help him."

Jack nodded with a brief, faint frown.

“All right, August—please be careful down there though. That place is nothing but darkness, and I’d be devastated if anything happened to you. I mean it—Noah is my family, but I consider you family, too.”

August went utterly still. The simple, raw sincerity of the statement—the unpracticed, intense concern hit him hard. He was visibly stunned, remaining silent for several moments. A deep, warm feeling spread through him, and his eyes softened. August expressed a breathed laugh.

“Well, I’m honored and proud you consider me as family, the feeling is mutual. I’ll be careful, I promise. We’ll talk soon, okay?”

“Yeah, looking forward to it,” Jack said with a nod and a smile.

After opening his eyes while standing on a street corner of the realm he created and had teleported back to, August frowned before closing his eyes once again. His mind began thinking as to how he would maneuver his way into Klipoth. Other than through the couple of nightmares he had experienced, both as a child and as an adult, he had never actually traveled to the hellish land before, and he wasn’t completely sure at that moment if he even *wanted* to, especially not alone, no matter if it were to save Jack’s son or not. *What happens if I get trapped there?*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Earth

Victoria's heart pounded like a drum, each beat a scream of dread as she burst through August's front door. Her breath hitched, ragged and shallow. The evening's traffic—once a worry—faded into insignificance. She was late. It was five minutes to nine.

"August! I'm here!" her voice, trembling with hope and panic, echoed into the suffocating silence.

The house was cold, still—no hum of the TV, no soft clicking of a keyboard. Just an oppressive hush that pressed down on her. She hurried through the living room, instinct guiding her toward the back of the house. Her stomach clenched. She stopped dead at the kitchen door—her eyes locking on the garage door. It was sealed with a jagged line of duct tape. A cold certainty replaced her panic. She darted to the drawers, grabbing the largest chef's knife she could find. Rushing back, she rammed the blade into the tape, trying to tear through the silver. It snagged and tore, and her breath hitched with frustration. With a choked sob, she abandoned the knife and threw her weight against the door handle, kicking until the wood splintered and the deadbolt finally shattered with a terrifying crack.

Darkness swallowed her as she pushed into the garage. Thick, warm air hung heavy, strange in its silence. The faint, distorted notes of a classical soundtrack drifted through the gloom. She fumbled blindly for the light switch; when the fluorescent flickered on, her stomach dropped. Every seam of the garage door was layered with overlapping strips of duct tape, sealing it airtight—a metallic tomb. In the center sat August's car with the engine softly humming and the windows rolled up.

Victoria's scream was raw, primal agony. She grabbed the fire extinguisher from the wall and pounded it against the driver's side window twice, until the glass spider-webbed and shattered inward. Stale, exhaust-laden air rushed out as she threw the door open. Her eyes flooded with tears at the sight inside: August, her son, slumped in the driver's seat, completely still, his head tilted to the side, pale, with an unnatural pink hue to his skin. The faint scent of carbon monoxide hit her like a blow. Without thinking, she pulled him out of the car and cradled his lifeless body, the vapor burning her throat. Her sobs echoed through the desolate garage as she ran into the kitchen, clutching him in her arms. Dropping to her knees, she shook him gently—then with mounting desperation.

"No," she cried, her voice breaking. "No, August! *Please!* Wake up! Please, honey—*please!*"

Amagi

With a sharp inhale of breath, August's eyes shot open; his body twisted in a frantic turn as he scanned the desolate street corner he found himself on. An inexplicable sensation washed over him; the distant, heart-wrenching sobs of his mother pierced the silence. He could hear her as clearly as if she were right beside him, her cries slicing through the air.

"August! August, please, wake up!" Victoria said, her voice laced with a despair that echoed in his ears.

August's features were etched with a deep frown of profound sadness, and his gaze darted frantically, searching for the location of the voice.

"Mom?" he called out. "Mom, where are you?"

Suddenly, a radiant, circular beacon of light materialized just a few feet ahead, and within its warm embrace, a vision emerged. It was

his mother, in the familiar confines of his kitchen back on Earth, clutching his lifeless form to her chest, her sobs cascading like a mournful melody. The sight struck August, resulting in his eyes brimming with tears that mirrored the sorrow of the scene before him.

“Mom,” he uttered, his voice being a mere whisper.

Choked with emotion, he began to sob softly while taking each step towards the light.

“August, why?” Victoria’s cries pierced the veil between worlds.

“Why, *why*?”

The sight of his mother enveloped in an endless cascade of sobs struck a deep, aching chord within August’s soul, transforming the moment into an excruciating ordeal. Witnessing her grief, a grief so profound it seemed to swallow her whole, made his heart bleed as if it were being torn asunder. This was not just a mirror of her anguish but a magnification of it within his own heart, as if her tears were falling directly onto his spirit, eroding it with sorrow. The overwhelming empathy he felt for her, combined with the helplessness of not being able to ease her pain, rendered him emotionally raw and exposed. In a moment of overwhelming sorrow, he averted his gaze from the heart-wrenching scene and sought solace against the cold embrace of a nearby white fence.

There, enveloped in a shroud of despair, he surrendered to his own grief; his sobs were loud and anguished. His soul, once light and airy, now felt burdened, as heavy as lead, while a sharp, relentless pain tore through his chest. Witnessing his mother’s anguish, witnessing her grieving for him felt like torture beyond words, as if unseen hands were violently tearing him apart, piece by piece.

Oblivious to the chaos his sorrow had unleashed, he failed to see how his sobs had summoned dark clouds to cloak the sky of the world he had brought to life. The sun, once a radiant beacon, was extinguished as if swallowed by the void, and the once vibrant birds, their colors a

testament to the realm's beauty, now turned black as night and plummeted lifelessly from the heavens. Amidst his profound grief, August finally looked up, his tearful eyes wide with disbelief, taking in the desolation that surrounded him, a world undone by his sorrow. He felt the tumult within him, a storm of low vibrational energy emanating from the depths of his soul, threatening the very essence of the high vibrational sanctuary he had manifested into existence. The realization struck him with the force of a thunderbolt—if he didn't restore balance at that very moment, Enki and his malevolent demons would descend upon Amagi, obliterating it and its inhabitants forever. Desperation clawed at his heart as he lowered his head. With his eyes squeezed shut, his face contorted in anguish. He gripped the white fence until his knuckles turned white.

"Please forgive me, Mom; I love you, but—go away," he tearfully uttered, his voice a heart-wrenching fusion of love and pain. "Go away! Go away! Go away!"

As if commanded by his pleas, the ominous light vanished as though swallowed by an unseen void. August summoned every ounce of his will, envisioning a beach bathed in the warmth of a radiant sun, its rays dancing upon the cresting waves of a clear, azure ocean. In his mind's eye, he saw himself and Cooper, his heart's companion, running along the shore, their laughter mingling with the symphony of the sea. He imagined Cooper's joyful leap, the playful tackle that sent them tumbling into the soft embrace of the sand, their laughter a balm to his weary soul. Miraculously, the dark shroud enveloping Amagi dissipated, and was replaced by a cerulean sky that heralded the sun's return. The once lifeless blackbirds stirred, their feathers bursting into a kaleidoscope of colors as they took flight.

As he opened his eyes, August felt the tears clouding his eyes once more, a sweet release from the piercing agony that had once constricted his heart. The pain of parting with the moment of grief he

shared with his mother was immense, yet he knew it was a sacrifice necessary to preserve the world he had built with love and determination.

“Please forgive me, Mom,” he whispered, his voice barely audible, a soft melody of regret and hope, “but it’s not goodbye forever, I promise.”

Noah lay sprawled on the cold, unforgiving floor of Klipoth, grappling with The Baphomet in a frenzy, desperate to shake off the monstrous weight pressing down on him. The creature’s claws dug into his legs, and a primal scream tore from Noah’s throat as he was slammed face-first into the ground. With a savage yank, The Baphomet withdrew its claw only to rip Noah’s shirt apart, exposing his vulnerable back. The air filled with the sickening sound of flesh being shredded, blood spraying like a grotesque fountain.

A searing pain radiated from the nape of Noah’s neck down to his waist, a fiery reminder of the horror he faced. In that moment of despair, August materialized from the shadows, a few feet away from the chaos. His eyes widened in disbelief as he surveyed the nightmarish scene before him. The sheer terror gripped him as he clutched his stomach, feeling it twist into a tight knot. His body quaked with the weight of fear. Just as paralysis threatened to take hold, he squeezed his eyes shut; his fists clenched so tightly that his knuckles turned white. He knew he had to transform his dread into determination in order to save Noah. With a fierce resolve etched on his face, August opened his eyes, his jaw set and brows furrowed in anger.

He strode towards The Baphomet, arms outstretched, palms glowing with a fierce blue energy. In an instant, two brilliant streaks of electrifying light shot out from August’s palms, striking the beast in its chest. The Baphomet howled, a guttural, demonic sound, as it was

hurled away from Noah. Without a moment's pause, August sprinted to Noah's side, where the agonized cries began to fade as the wounds on his back miraculously began to mend.

"Noah!" August shouted, his voice echoing. "We need to get you out of here—"

"No!" Noah shouted, his eyes wide with terror as he scrambled backward, putting distance between himself and August. "No! Get me out of here! Get me out of here! Please get me out!"

A confused frown was etched on August's face as he tried to grasp Noah's frantic reaction. Then, realization hit him like a cold wave, resulting in him shaking his head with a brief close of his eyes.

"No, Noah, calm down!" August urged while rushing towards him. "I am here to get you out!"

"No! No!" Noah cried while darting towards a shadowy wall. "Get me out of here! Please get me out!"

August sprinted after Noah, grabbed him, and pulled him into a tight hold despite Noah's desperate thrashing.

"Noah! Calm down! That's what I'm *here* to do!"

"No!" Noah shouted, his voice raw with fear. "You're a demon! Let me go—"

"I'm *not*!" August shouted back, frustration boiling over. "*Listen* to me, damn it! I'm here to help! Jack told me you were here! You're *safe* now! Just *breathe*!"

Noah's frantic energy began to wane as he locked eyes with August, confusion mingling with fear. Slowly, he leaned against August's shoulder as he broke into light sobs. August's brow furrowed with sympathy.

"It's okay," August said, his voice softening. "but we need to act fast, all right? Think of the word 'teleport' in your mind and focus on it. I'll close my eyes and guide you to where you need to go."

Noah glared at August, and a confused frown appeared on his

face as he tried to grasp the meaning behind his words. Suddenly, clarity struck him like lightning. He nodded, wiping away his streaming tears, but when he turned to look behind him, horror gripped him—there was Leah. On the other side of the lake of fire, she was being torn apart by a swarm of archons, her screams piercing the air as she fought desperately, blood spraying in every direction. Noah's heart raced, his eyes widening with despair.

"Oh my God," Noah whispered, his voice trembling.

August frowned and squinted at Noah; concern etched on his features.

"Noah, what's wrong? What do you see?"

"It's *Leah*!" Noah shouted. "She's over there! They're attacking her! I have to save her!"

With a surge of adrenaline, Noah pushed August aside and sprinted towards the lake of fire, but August seized his arm, yanking him back with urgency. His gaze darted to the left, where a massive Baphomet loomed and was gathering a horde of towering archons from the fiery ground. Panic surged through August.

"Noah, stop! You can't go!" August shouted.

"What do you mean I can't? That's my wife! Let go of me!" Noah roared, struggling against August's grip.

"No, Noah! We have to get out of here—"

"Let go of me!"

August shot another glance to the left, seeing the Baphomet and its army charging towards them. He knew they stood no chance against such overwhelming odds. With determination, he wrapped his arms around Noah's waist and pulled him back with all his strength towards the wall behind them.

"Noah, we have to go *now*!" August yelled.

"No! Get off me! Let me go!" Noah shouted while fighting against August's hold. "I won't leave her! Let me *go*!"

As August held Noah in his clutches, he saw the Baphomet and the archons were just five feet away from them both. August wondered if he and Noah would have enough time to teleport away from there before the Baphomet and the archons reached them. As August's stomach twisted into cramping knots, his heart raced faster, his blood ran cold, and his skin became clammy. Every bone in his back tightened and squeezed, resulting in him feeling sharp, piercing, burning pain up and down his spine. The perspiration of fear streamed down the side of August's face. As August closed his eyes, he tried his best to hold on to Noah, who was still fighting with all his might to escape August's clutches.

As August felt the foul, sulfur-smelling breath of the Baphomet and the archons on his skin, he closed his eyes. *Teleport!* August pictured his Myrtle Beach, South Carolina home, the one he mentally built during his many astral projection trips. Through intent and telepathy, August shared the vision of his South Carolina home with Noah, and within seconds, August and Noah found themselves transported into the living room of his home, and with haste, Noah pushed August away hard.

"Why the *fuck* did you do that? *Take me back down there!*" Noah shouted with widened eyes and flared nostrils.

"Well, first of all," August replied, "I didn't do anything, not on my own anyway. Deep down, your subconscious intent wanted to get out of there too. So as a result, you teleported out of there with me, and no, I'm not taking you back down there though; nope, not doing it."

Noah stared at August with a clenched jaw and tears streaming as August walked over to his kitchen.

"*Fuck you, I'll find a way back down there myself,*" Noah said before rushing past August.

"No, Noah, wait!" August shouted while rushing over and grabbing Noah's arm.

"Get off me, you son of a bitch!" Noah yelled while yanking his

arm away. “You know, I couldn’t *stand* you when I was alive, and now I can’t stand you even *more*! I’m *going* back down there!”

Noah turned to walk away, but August stepped in front of him.

“No, I can’t let you, Noah.”

Noah frowned and looked him up and down with hatred.

“Let me?” Noah shouted, his face turning red.

“Noah, you don’t get it—”

“No, you don’t get it! That’s my fucking wife! I—I *saw* her being—*shredded* and torn to *pieces* like some—like some sort of fucking rag doll!”

Noah looked away with a shake of his head.

“They were *killing* her down there!” Noah said tearfully. “And you want me to *forget*—”

“No, I *don’t*!” August yelled. “But Noah, you’re *not* ready to save her yet! Trust me, you *aren’t*! You couldn’t even help or save *yourself* down there! How in the *hell* are you going to save her? I’m not saying forget her; we’re *going* to save her, I promise, but not yet! Noah, I’m asking you to *trust* me.”

With tearful eyes, Noah looked up and around the spacious, white wall room with a white cushioned sofa and armchair and then over at the large, open-spaced kitchen, Noah frowned as he wiped streaming tears away.

“Wh—where are we?” Noah asked with a shaky, tearful voice.

August stared at him and could tell that he was still traumatized. His hands were still trembling, his hair was disheveled, his face was red, and dark circles were under his eyes. To August, it looked as if Noah had been down in the Land of Klipoth for years, even decades.

“Amagi,” August replied while walking to the kitchen, “a realm inside Pleroma, the free universe, the place where everyone enslaved by Enki should be.”

Looking up and all around at August’s home once more, Noah

shook his head with a sad frown. The house was everything Noah always wished he could've had when he was alive.

"Is this your home?" Noah asked.

"Yeah," August replied as he walked back over to Noah and handed him a bottled water. "Here, I'm sure you could use this after being down where you were."

Noah took the bottled water and slightly nodded with a faint frown.

"Thank you," Noah replied in a low tone before opening the bottle and chugging down the water immediately.

"You're welcome," August said as he sat on the sofa.

With a deep frown and a brow raised, August stared at Noah, who was still standing and staring at the bottle in his hand, seemingly lost in his own thoughts.

"You know, you're welcome to sit down too," August said.

Noah looked at the armchair behind him and then at his clothes with a frown.

"No, I'll—get your—expensive chair dirty, I'll sit on the floor," Noah replied.

August laughed while briefly looking away and shaking his head.

"It's fine, Noah, I'll just—manifest it being clean again later."

Noah stared at him with a frown and a raised brow before shaking his head and sitting down.

"So, are you here via—astral projection?" Noah asked.

"No, I died—physically anyway. I ended my life to be able to go to Klipoth and help you and then to help the other IS-BEs as well."

Noah stared at August, frozen with widened eyes.

"What?"

"I—ended my existence so I could go and try to help you and other IS-BEs. That's why I can't let you go back down there, Noah."

Noah stared at him while blinking repeatedly. He was so stunned

that he didn't even know what to say for several seconds.

"After how I treated you on Earth—I can't believe you did that to come down to Klipoth to help me."

"I know, crazy, right?" August replied with a smile before laughing and shaking his head. "I didn't do it to just help *you* though, so there's that."

"Well—thank you," Noah said in a low voice while looking away from him.

"No thanks is needed. Your daughter is here too."

Noah shot an instant glare back over to him as tears clouded his eyes.

"What did you say?"

"I said she's here," August said. "She didn't go through the light. I know because I saw her playing with my dog in my backyard."

As a loud, rough breath escaped from Noah, he frowned. Looking down, he pressed his fist to his mouth while shutting his eyes tight. Right at that moment, Hazel appeared a few feet away from August. Her eyes widened when she saw Noah.

"Daddy!" Hazel exclaimed.

Hearing his daughter's voice, Noah looked up and widened his own eyes at the sight of her.

"Hazel!" Noah tearfully exclaimed before jumping up, rushing over to her, dropping to his knees, pulling her into a warm hug, and breaking into sobs.

"Daddy, I missed you," Hazel said while hugging him back.

"I missed you too, princess," Noah said before pushing her away and kissing her on her cheek and then pulling her back into his arms for a hug again. "I missed you so, so, so much."

August got up, walked over, stooped down beside Hazel, took one of her hands into his, and smiled.

"Hazel, Cooper's in the backyard. Do you want to go out and play

with him for a little while?”

Hazel stared at August with a smirk and a brow raised.

“If you want me to leave the room so you and my dad can talk about things you don’t want me to hear about, just say so,” Hazel said before shaking her head and walking away, “jeesh.”

Laughing, August stood back up and shook his head.

“You have one adorable kid there, Noah,” August said, “you should—”

“I don’t care what you say. I’m going back down there to get my wife, so I need you to keep watching Hazel for me until I come back.” Noah said before storming past August.

August sighed with a brief close of his eyes and a brow raised and a shake of his head.

“Damn it, I already told you, you *can’t*—”

“Yes I *can*!” Noah shouted. “She’s my wife!”

“What the *hell*!” August shouted. “Noah, what part of you’re not ready to *rescue* her yet, do you *not get*?”

“How do you know what I’m not ready for? You don’t even *know* me!” Noah shouted.

“You have no idea who you’re going up against,” August warned. “This is not fucking *Earth*! That damn creature ripping you apart down there wasn’t a *mortal*! That place you were *in* wasn’t *hell* either! It’s called the Land of Klipoth—”

“I *know*!” Noah shouted. “Enki’s—aliens or—whatever the hell they are, told me before they threw me down to that damn place—”

“Do you *also* need to be reminded that it’s *owned* by Enki too? Because it is! I’m talking about *Enki* here! *Lucifer*! The legendary, immortal god who will *rip* you to fucking *shreds* and tear you apart for an *eternity* if you’re not ready to go to war with him and you *aren’t*!”

“So you think you know me?” Noah snapped. “Huh? Is that it? What, you think just because you’ve been talking to my father that you

know me! You *don't*—”

“Yeah, but I do,” Christopher said while walking into the living from the kitchen.

“Damn it, Christopher,” August said after sighing, “I told you to wait until I call you to come in here.”

“Yeah, I know, but no cap—I got tired of waiting,” Christopher replied with a smirk and a shrug, resulting in August expressing a breathed laugh with a shake of his head.

Noah’s eyes widened at the sight of Christopher.

“Christopher! You’re here!” Noah exclaimed before rushing over and hugging Christopher.

Christopher displayed a brief smile before hugging him back.

“I was so devastated when you died,” Noah replied tearfully after pulling away from Christopher.

“Yeah, I was too,” Christopher said in a low, dejected tone. “I didn’t want to, but Enki and his archons caused it. They tricked me for a little bit after death, but then, quickly, I got smart and turned away from them. Noah, I feel so bad about what happened to you and Hazel; really, I do, but August is right, you’re not ready.”

“Oh, not you too, damn it,” Noah said before rolling his eyes and pacing back and forth.

“Look, Noah,” August said, “on one side of the coin, I get it, it’s your wife. You want to help her, and believe it or not, I want you to, too, and so does Christopher. However, on the *other* side of the coin, Noah, you will be *destroyed* a *billion* times over if you go back to Klipoth and face off against Enki and his demons. What? You think a few punches and hits will knock Enki and his demons out? You think it’s that easy? You may be a good fighter on Earth, but they don’t *always* fight physically in the afterlife. It may seem like they do because in The Summerland, they have bats and batons, but it’s not specifically a physical fight; it’s a supernatural one.”

"He's right," Christopher chimed in, "Noah, they fight with powers that you possess but don't even know how to access yet. So—going up against Enki and his demons—you are *not* that guy, sorry."

"Well, yeah," August said, glancing over at Christopher briefly, "but Noah, if you give me some time, if you let me train you, you *can* be that guy. I can get you ready—"

"I don't have *time*!" Noah yelled, his voice shaking with emotion. August shook his head while laughing.

"That's *bullshit*, and you know it," August replied with a brief, faint smile. "All you *have* is time now, especially here. Look—I was thinking of helping you get back to The Summerland so you could be back with your father, but then I realized that if I did that, you, Leah, and Jack would never be able to escape from Enki. So, I think you should stay here and let me train you *and* Christopher so that all *three* of us can help Leah get out of Klipoth and get Jack from The Summerland too—"

"Hold on, hold on, hold on—*what*!" Noah exclaimed. "So—so, wait, you want me to leave my father in that goddamned hell environment by himself—*no*!"

"Noah, you don't have a *choice*!" Christopher shouted.

"Yes I *do*! He's my *father*, Christopher!" Noah shouted with emotion cracking his voice. "He would *never* do that to me! I can't just *leave* him there—"

"Noah, do you ever want to be with your father *away* from The Summerland?" August asked.

Noah raised a brow and frowned at August before slightly shaking his head.

"Well—yeah, if that can be done, yeah, but—"

"Do you want him to meet your daughter?" Christopher interjected.

"Of course," Noah replied, "what kind of question is that—"

"Well then, you *have* to stay here and *let* me *help* you," August

said. "Believe me, if you ever want to have a forever reality with your father and your wife, you *cannot* go back to The Summerland right now. Stay here and let me train you so you can help both your wife and your father escape from Enki."

Turning away from August and Christopher, Noah closed his eyes and frowned as tears streamed. Deep down, he felt August and Christopher were telling the truth. He remembered what Enki and his draconians did to him when he refused to kneel. He remembered the strength of the Baphomet beast that was on top of him down in Klipoth. August and Christopher were right; there was no way Noah could help Jack or Leah in the state that he was in. Noah would need August's help; he would need whatever training was necessary if he ever stood any ounce of a chance of going to war against Enki and winning.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Despite it being early morning in *The Summerland*, the entire city still looked like it was surrounded by the dim darkness of the night. However, it didn't matter to Jack whether it was early morning, afternoon, or evening. All his mind could think about was Noah. Pacing back and forth in the living room, he could feel his eyes burning with tiredness, but he didn't care. There was no way he could sleep without knowing if his son was okay.

"Jack," August said, appearing behind Jack.

Hearing August's voice, Jack turned around with widened, alert eyes. Seeing that August was alone, Jack frowned with a shake of his head.

"You're not using your invisibility ability."

"I know," August replied. "I'm taking a big risk. I only have ten minutes to talk to you before Enki and his—crazies realize I'm here and bust in."

Jack nodded.

"So, where's Noah? Outside somewhere?"

After taking a deep breath and then slowly exhaling, August swallowed hard and shook his head, trying to prepare himself mentally for what he was about to tell Jack.

"He's safe, he's in Amagi, Jack."

Jack frowned and squinted with a shake of his head.

"Well—wh—why didn't you bring him back *here*?"

Sighing, August walked over closer to Jack.

"Jack, you asked me before to get to him so that I could give him

a message—”

“Yeah, a message not to come here after death, but now that he’s here, I need him to find some way to help me get out of here—”

“Right, and so in order for him to help you get out of here, in order for him to help his *wife* get out of Klipoth, which is where she is right now, he has to get trained to go to war against Enki and his archons, and he has to do it in Amagi—”

“Fine, take *me* to Amagi too then,” Jack cut in, “You can do it—”

“No, I *can’t*,” August interjected, “honestly, I didn’t even really get Noah out of Klipoth. I mean, I strongly urged him and pleaded with him to leave with me, but his subconscious got him out. Even though he didn’t want to, his subconscious teleported him away without him even realizing it, and I teleported away with him. So no, Jack, I can’t just—*take* you away from here, but are you willing to use your teleportation ability to get *yourself* out of here?”

Jack stared at August with narrowed eyes and a clenched jaw.

“No! You remember what I told you happened *every* damn time I tried using any of my abilities!” Jack shouted. “What, did you *forget*?”

“Damn it, no, I—I remember,” August replied after shaking his head and closing his eyes.

“You know *damn* well that astral law enforcement will arrive *anywhere* on the grounds of The Summerland in less than a *heartbeat* if they catch anyone here trying to teleport away!” Jack shouted. “If they catch me using teleportation, they’ll *grab* me and put me through punishment *again*—”

“I *know*, Jack!” August interrupted in a strong, forceful tone, “I absolutely *forgot* for a second, but—yeah, you’re right, I know. Maybe—I guess—I was just hoping you’d be brave enough to take the risk of trying—*again*. *Knowing* all that though is why I need Noah to *stay* in Amagi and *train* with me so he and his friend Christopher and I can come back here and *help* get you out. It means we’re going to have to go

to war with Enki, but—”

“But so you expect me to just *stay* up here by myself when I *just* got reunited with him? I’m supposed to just be without him? *Again?*”

“Jack, look,” August said before sighing with a slight roll of his eyes, “I know—”

“No, you look!” Jack shouted, his voice cracking with emotion. “August—I’ve been without him for *decades*, and *just* when I get reunited with him again, you take him *away*? *Really?*”

“Jack, I *had* to!” August yelled. “If I don’t keep him away from here and train him, you’ll eventually *never* see him again! You *know* that! Everyone here is *going* to get reincarnated, including you eventually! Then you’ll *never* see your son *again!*”

Turning his back to August, Jack wiped streaming tears away and shook his head.

“You know, the moment he was born, it changed everything,” Jack uttered softly. “Holding him for the first time, all five pounds and eight ounces of him, I knew I’d love him more than I ever thought possible. More than I ever loved myself, and despite me dying when he was little, that love still remained strong. I remember, once, when I was just a kid, spending a summer in North Carolina, I had an accident and shattered my knee. It was the kind of pain that consumes you, where every nerve feels like it’s aflame. But even that didn’t come anywhere close to the pain I felt the day I had to leave Noah, knowing I’d be leaving him fatherless.”

Jack’s gaze shifted to August as his eyes brimmed with tears.

“Being away from him has been *unbearable*, August,” he confessed tearfully. “The thought of being separated from him again, missing even a single moment more of his life, is something I *just* don’t think I can endure. It’s a heaviness on my soul that I *just* don’t think I have the strength to bear.”

The confession landed like a physical blow to August’s solar

plexus. For a stark second, the calculating mask that was August Cameron completely fractured. He saw the genuine agony in Jack's eyes, the profound, agonizing, *unbearable* weight of a father's love. August felt no judgment toward Jack; instead, a scorching, white-hot envy flared up from the deepest part of August's gut. Jack's pain was only possible because he had experienced the joy of the bond he had with his son. *Unbearable?* August thought, his mind twisting. He didn't envy the suffering, he envied the fundamental, foundational love that made the suffering possible—a love his own father, stolen by Enki before August's birth, had never given him the chance to know. August saw the bond, and all he felt was the vast, cold void in his own history. August's lips thinned instantly, his jaw clenched so hard that the muscle jumped. The barest shadow of that corrosive jealousy, that raw, envious ache for a life denied, flickered across his eyes.

August recognized the dangerous shift immediately. *Stop it.* He closed his eyes and lowered and shook his head—a subtle, sharp motion meant to shake the destructive emotion out of his system. The jealousy was a liability. At that moment, August needed cold logic, not white-hot envy. As August opened his eyes, he forced the emotional surge down, sealing the void within him back up and putting himself back into a glacial focus.

"Jack, it's just for a little while. I *promise*," August said in a low voice. "He's *going* to come back for you, and when he does, you both will be together forever. Just think of the granddaughter you'll get to meet once you're all in Amagi together."

Looking back at August, Jack was silent for a few seconds before looking away again and nodding as more tears streamed. He knew his only choice *was* to trust August, hoping that Noah really *could* help him escape The Summerland—before too late.

Later, as Jack lay asleep on his bed in his apartment, his mind drifted into a dreamworld, back to his second week at The Summerland—



Jack walked the streets of The Summerland, still having no idea how *everything* operated in the city. As he walked past a big, clean, manicured grass park, he stopped in his tracks and felt his heart racing. He felt his stomach jumping as if it were filled with numerous butterflies, and it was because he saw *her*, his wife, *Joanna*. He wasn't sure if he was just imagining her there or not, but at that moment, she certainly looked as if she were really there, sitting under a tree, reading a book with squinted eyes and a frown on her face.

He could tell she was focused on every word her eyes came upon, and as he stared at her shoulder-length brown hair, her soft, green eyes, her ankle-length, ocean blue skirt, and satin, white blouse, he smiled. His sparkling blue eyes were proof of how he was still so much in love with her. It felt as if every step he took towards her couldn't get him over to her fast enough.

"Joanna," Jack said in a soft voice.

As Joanna looked up from her book, her eyes widened, and she smiled.

"*Jack!*" She exclaimed before jumping up, running over to him, and pulling him into a tight hug. "Oh, Jack! You're here!"

Hugging her back, he closed his eyes and reveled in the sweet jasmine scent that surrounded her, the scent that had always made him melt whenever she was close in his arms.

"How are you here?" he asked in a low voice. "I thought Jesus said I'd only see you again after I finish my next incarnation."

Pulling away from him, she stared at him with a frown.

"That wasn't me he showed you, Jack. That was an illusion, a trick

to get you here.”

Shaking his head, he blinked twice with a brow raised.

“What? No, no, it *wasn’t*. Jesus said that I’d be reincarnating, and he said—”

“It *wasn’t* real, Jack, *none* of it was. Enki—Jesus—or—Yaldabaoth, he just said that to *get* you here. Yaldabaoth and his archons trick people with the vision of loved ones and friends to get you to come through the white light and to come here.”

Jack looked away, continuing to blink quickly, trying to decipher what he was being told.

“Yeah, but—”

Jack stopped as Joanna lowered her lips to his and caressed his mouth in a lingering kiss. Jack submitted himself to every galvanizing sensation, forgetting the fact that they both were in a public park. Only that moment of delight mattered. As Joanna pulled away from a kiss that Jack felt ended much too soon, he frowned.

“I’ve missed you so much, Joanna,” Jack said in a low, tearful whisper.

Nodding as her eyes shimmered with tears, Joanna smiled.

“I’ve missed you too,” she whispered, “every day without you felt like a day without sunshine.”

“How long have you been here?” Jack asked.

“Seven, long years,” Joanna replied as tears streamed, “I wish I had gotten to see Noah grow up. How was he after I died?”

“Well,” Jack replied, “he—”

Jack stopped as Enki, several draconians, and twelve, fifteen-foot-tall archons marched over to where he and Joanna were, with two of the draconians grabbing Joanna by the arm and yanking her away from Jack.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Jack shouted.

“Stay the *fuck* out of this! This isn’t your *goddamn* concern!” Enki

shouted, smoke shooting out of his mouth and his eyes turning bright, fiery red.

“Get off me! Let me *go*!” Joanna yelled while struggling to get free of the two draconians holding her. “Jack! *Help* me!”

As the draconians dragged Joanna away with Enki, the other draconians, and the archons following, Jack and every city resident sitting in and near the park followed as well.

“Jack!” Joanna shouted through sobs. “Jack, *help* me!”

“Let her *go*!” Jack yelled as he ran after the draconians dragging Joanna.

In a swift action, Enki spun around, stooped down rapidly, and punched Jack hard in the face, making him fall to the ground with a bloody nose.

“I said stay the *fuck* out of this, you goddamn *corporeal*!” Enki yelled, his voice making a loud, thunderous roar with each word he spoke.

As Enki stood and continued following behind the draconians and archons, Jack got to his feet while wiping the blood from his nose. He closed his eyes tight for a few seconds, shook his head, and then opened his eyes, trying to clear the blurriness from his vision. Looking up and ahead of him, his eyes widened as he saw where the draconians were taking Joanna. Just two feet from Joanna was the recycling machine—a gigantic, long, thick, black, leather, exam-styled table with four thick, glittery wrist and ankle straps attached.

Several thick steel rings were encircled high above the entire table with electricity shooting through them every two minutes. To Jack, it looked like an electric shock death slab. He wouldn’t let Joanna be put on there; he *couldn’t*.

“*Joanna*!” Jack yelled at the top of his lungs as a big, thick, red, fiery ball of lightning and fire exploded out of the palms of his hands.

Jack gasped and shot his widened, tearful eyes down at the ball

of lightning and fire floating and rotating in the middle of his palms. It *appeared*. Another ability that Jack never knew he had had emerged. To Jack, it was a message that was being sent to him to use the ability to help his wife. Closing his eyes for two seconds, he expressed a short, rough exhale before reopening his eyes and running over to where Enki, the draconians, the archons, and several other city residents had gathered around the exam-styled table. As Jack rushed over, he shot his arms out, and the ball of lightning and fire in his palms shot out towards Enki. However, with rapid speed, Enki ducked down and missed being hit by the ball of lightning and fire. As the ball of lightning and fire instantly disappeared from Jack's palms, Jack gaped while shooting his eyes down at his palms.

"No, no, no!" Jack shouted. "Why'd you go *away*?"

Before Jack could do anything else, two of the archons grabbed him and held him tight in their clutches.

"No! No! Let me go! Let me go!" Jack shouted while struggling to get free from the archons. "Let me go!"

Lifting Joanna up in the air, one of the draconians slammed her down on the table hard, causing her to yell out in pain. As Joanna broke into loud, hysterical sobs, one of the draconians grabbed the thick, glittery straps and pinned down her wrists and ankles. Two draconians standing on both sides of Joanna slammed numerous electrodes on both sides of her head.

"*Jack!*" Joanna cried. "Jack, help me! Help me! *Please!*"

"Let her go!" Jack yelled at the top of his lungs while struggling to get free of the archons holding him. "Let her go, *damn* it! Let her go—"

"*Silence!*" Enki yelled. "This bitch's time for reincarnation has *come!*"

"No!" Joanna yelled at the top of her lungs.

"No, please don't do this! No!" Jack yelled while breaking into sobs of his own. "No!"

"Start the process!" Enki yelled with a big smile.

"No!" Jack yelled while fighting harder to get free of the archons holding him. "No, *please!* Let her go!"

Lifting his arm and hand to the sky, out of nowhere, a gigantic, golden trident appeared in Enki's hand. Enki pointed the trident at the thick, steel rings of the table, causing a thick, electrifying flame to shoot out of the trident and into the rings. Instantly, thick, blue, and white electricity jolted up and down the rings, causing Joanna to convulse with severity. As Joanna's screams turned into hysterical sobs, Jack dropped to his knees while breaking into what were now severe sobs.

"No! No! No!" Jack cried while still trying to get free from the archons holding him. "No, stop! Stop! Stop!"

As Enki tilted his head back, a booming, thunderous laugh erupted from him, resonating with a chilling joy that echoed through the air. His archons and draconians joined in, their laughter merging into a haunting symphony of countless disembodied voices, each one a reminder of the darkness that surrounded them. Meanwhile, Joanna's body was consumed by a blinding sphere of electricity and fire, her insides bursting forth as if she were a vessel filled with explosive despair. Blood sprayed across the ground, staining Enki, his draconians, his archons, the terrified citizens, and Jack, painting a gruesome picture of loss.

With every agonizing scream that Joanna let out, the electric jolts surged violently along the table, a cruel dance of agony. In mere moments, Joanna's form morphed into a vast, radiant blue orb of energy, soaring from the table and piercing through the net that confined the city, disappearing into the vast, star-studded abyss above. Her muffled cries lingered in the air, haunting the silence for what felt like an eternity.

As the reality of her absence settled in, Jack collapsed to the ground, his sobs erupting uncontrollably, each sob a testament to his

shattered heart. His face flushed as red as blood, and his body shook with the weight of grief. He had already lost her once, and now, in this cruel twist of fate, she was gone forever, leaving him to grapple with an emptiness that felt insurmountable.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Awakening from his dream, Jack gasped as he shot open his widened eyes. His breaths were heavy, and his forehead glistened with perspiration. His eyes were tearful as he stared up at his white popcorn ceiling. He regretted ever having his mind replay the nightmare of the day he lost his wife for a second time, *permanently*. The longer he stared up at the ceiling, the more his eyes became heavy, and soon, he found himself falling into sleep again, with his mind drifting into the dreamworld once again to revisit another nightmare, the nightmare of the punishment he suffered just hours after trying to save Joanna—



Jack struggled to get free from the two archons dragging him to a large square-sized, asphalt area of the park in The Summerland, but he couldn't. They were stronger than him, and despite him desperately trying in some way to get the ball of lightning and fire to reappear back into the palms of his hands, for some reason, it just wouldn't.

"Let me go!" Jack yelled. "Let me go! Get off me!"

As Enki, several draconians, and all the residents of The Summerland gathered around the asphalt area of the park, the two archons dragged Jack to the middle of the area and walked away. As Jack tried to get to his feet, thick steel rings manifested from out of thin air and shackled his wrists tightly to the ground. Jack shot his widened eyes down at the shackles with a deep frown.

“No, no! Get these off me!” Jack shouted while struggling to get the shackles off his wrists. “Get them off! Get them off!”

Hearing loud barking from several dogs, Jack looked up to his right and saw four big Pit bull dogs charging towards him. Jack’s eyes widened even more; his heart raced faster, and within seconds, perspiration appeared on his forehead. His arms and legs immediately felt numb and as cold as ice; his stomach burned and twisted in pain.

“No, oh no, no, no, no, no, no,” Jack said while slightly shaking his head.

As Jack turned over onto his left side, the dogs reached him and started biting and tearing into his arms and legs. As Jack shouted out in pain and unsuccessfully tried his best to use his feet to kick the Pit bulls away from him, some of the residents laughed, cheered, and applauded. Enki’s face completely transformed into one that was half human and half Baphomet with horns and a disfigured face that was covered in blood-oozing, rotting flesh. As Enki’s draconians and archons vibrated, so did Enki as they all fed off the brutality taking place before them. As the Pit bulls pulled out chunks of Jack’s flesh from his legs, arms, and now even neck, Jack coughed with severity as blood spilled from his mouth. Each bite felt as if every inch of his skin, flesh, and vein in his body was on fire.

His heart skipped beats, and his insides felt as if they were being scorched from the inside out. As he felt the teeth of the Pit bulls sinking into his flesh, his body felt like numerous nails were being hammered into him. As Jack cried out, he didn’t think his soul could die, but at that moment, he hoped it would so that the pain he was feeling at that moment would end. He *pleaded* for his soul to die, but it wouldn’t. As a big puddle of blood covered the ground underneath Jack, one of the Pit bulls ripped open Jack’s stomach, revealing his intestines, and within seconds, the other Pit bulls ripped out his intestines with their teeth. It was at that moment that Jack felt an immediate, searing pain shoot from

his stomach up to his chest. After a few seconds, the pain in his chest turned into feeling as if his entire body was being fried with electricity. Clenching his fists, he shut his eyes tight and pleaded to someone—*anyone* in the universe—to somehow stop the pain he was feeling. However, the pain continued until the flesh on his stomach and the flesh on other parts of his body reappeared back intact again, only for the Pit bulls to tear it off him all over again. As Jack continued sobbing and yelling at the top of his lungs, he knew there was nothing else he could do to stop what was happening. This was his punishment, and he would have to endure it for however long Enki wished for him to—



Breaking out of his dream, with tearful eyes, Jack gasped while shooting up on his bed. Clutching his bedsheets tight, he frowned and closed his eyes as tears streamed. *Damn it, why do I keep dreaming about this shit?* Jack didn't know, but he was *tired* of it. He didn't *want* to dream about it; it hurt him too much to revisit it all. However, before he could mentally protest, his mind immediately forced the replaying of another memory in his head: the second month after Joanna's absence from The Summerland—



It was a warm day in July, and Jack had been told from day one of his arrival in The Summerland that he had to get a job, but landing one was difficult, and until he landed one, he was homeless, living in alleys and parks. Not only was he homeless, but he was hungry, which was completely bizarre to him, seeing as how he was dead. Never had he heard of souls getting hungry and needing food in the afterlife, but then again, he had also never heard of an afterlife realm called The Summerland before either. As he walked past a bar and grille, he stopped

and looked into the window at the numerous patrons inside—drinking, eating, and listening to a band play dark, occultic music.

Within seconds of him standing there, he caught a whiff of the enticing aroma of macaroni and cheese and buffalo wings. The aroma made his stomach churn. He felt as if he hadn't eaten in days, but he lacked money. Jack rolled his eyes and shook his head. He thought about going inside and asking the bar owner for something to eat, *anything* to sustain him, if only for a few hours anyway, but his pride wouldn't let him. He'd feel too embarrassed asking for anything he didn't already have. Walking over to the door, Jack looked through the window and focused his eyes on a plate of macaroni and cheese on a back corner table.

His eyes became glued to it, to the point where everything else in his peripheral vision disappeared. Within seconds, the plate of food slowly levitated off the table by itself and glided towards the door. Jack gaped with widened eyes. *Am I doing this? Am I?* Despite doing telekinesis once, a few days before his death, the fact that he was doing it again at that moment stunned him.

"What the *hell*?" Jack whispered under his breath.

"A Psion!" a man in the bar shouted while staring at Jack.

"What?" Jack said while taking his eyes off the plate and taking steps away from the bar, causing the plate of food to crash to the floor.

As Jack turned around, he bumped into Enki, several draconians, and ten of Enki's archons. Sucking in his breath and holding it, Jack's eyes widened as Enki lowered his large face down as close as possible over to Jack's. Before Jack could say a word, Enki's eyes glowed bright red as he lifted his long arm high in the air and slashed his long, sharp claw nails across Jack's neck, causing blood to spurt everywhere. As the archons let out long, vibrated wails, Jack's body flew several feet away to the ground on his stomach.

After a few seconds, as Jack got up onto his knees and coughed

up blood onto the ground, he could feel the burning sting from the left side of his neck. It felt like the pain from a bee sting times a million. Because the view for Jack was blurry as he got to his feet, Jack shook his head, trying to clear his vision. As soon as he was on his feet, one of the archons grabbed the back of Jack's legs, making him trip and fall to the ground, and dragged him down the street.

"What are you doing? Get off!" Jack yelled as he struggled to get free. "Get off me! Get off!"

As Jack was dragged, he saw almost everyone in the city rushing out of their apartment buildings and businesses—*watching* him. Most watched with dropped shoulders, softened eyes, furrowed brows, and turned down mouths, while only a few of The Summerland citizens laughed, cheered, and applauded. The more Jack fought and scratched to get the archon's hands off his legs, the more Jack's hands seemed to feel as if they were burning at the mere touch of the archon's hands. Jack felt a painful burning seep deep down into his flesh and bones, causing him to yell out in pain. He thought of trying to pull himself as hard as possible in the opposite direction away from the archon. However, the more he pulled, the more he could feel his bones stretching farther and farther apart, causing sharp, throbbing pain to shoot throughout his body.

"Get off me!" Jack yelled. "Get off!"

Enki, his draconians, and the other archons stopped in front of a tall, blood red post in the middle of a large, diamond-shaped, baseball field-sized area filled with sand, resulting in the archon dragging Jack to stop too. Jack looked up and saw the entire area encircled by the citizens of The Summerland as if they were about to watch a jousting tournament.

"What are you all *doing*?" Jack shouted, turning his upper body over as much as he could to look at Enki and his servants. "What—"

Jack stopped as Enki slammed his claws down deep into Jack's

back, causing Jack to yell out as blood spurted out of his back. With force, Enki yanked Jack's body up, slammed his body up against the post, with him facing it, and tied his arms around the post with thick, metal, electrifying cuffs that appeared out of thin air and that were linked to the post.

"No!" Jack yelled while struggling to get free from the post. "No, let me go! Let me *go*, I didn't *do* anything! Let me *go*!"

"Oh yes, the *fuck* you *did* do something, you detritus *fuck*!" Enki yelled in a low, roaring, vibrating voice as fiery smoke shot from his mouth and his eyes glowed red again. "You know *goddamn* well about the list of abilities that are forbidden here! For that, you will *pay*!"

Jack frowned while shaking his head.

"No!" Jack shouted. "No, I didn't even realize—please don't do this! I—"

Jack stopped as one of the draconians gagged his mouth with a dirty, white cloth that they tied so tight that Jack felt burning pressure from the cloth's tied knot in the back of his head.

"Enact punishment!" Enki shouted to his draconians.

Immediately, one of the draconians ripped off Jack's shirt, revealing his bare back. Immediately afterward, a second draconian lifted his arm in the air, and instantly it turned into a red, long, thick leather whip. Without hesitation, the draconian slammed the whip hard across Jack's back, causing him to let out a muffled, guttural yell. The gasps from some of The Summerland citizens were heard faintly in Jack's ears. Quickly lifting his hand-converted whip again in the air, the second draconian slashed it hard across Jack's back a second time, causing Jack to drop to his knees while letting out another muffled yell at the top of his lungs. It was at this time that the whipping came at a faster rate. Each time the whip came down on his back, Jack felt a sharp, searing pain shoot through his chest. His back felt like it was on fire and being stung by a million bees all at once.

He could feel an intense pounding pain in his head, and every breath he took felt heavy and short. The sharp, searing pain he felt in his chest seemed to travel down to his stomach, waist, and legs. On the twelfth lash, he felt as if every nerve in his body was being shredded to pieces, and on the thirteenth lash, he felt bile rush up from his stomach to his mouth like a tidal wave, resulting in him vomiting up onto the cloth in his mouth and onto the ground. As the lashes kept coming, Jack broke out into loud sobs.

Behind Jack, As Enki, his draconians and archons fed off Jack's pain and anguish, Enki's face completely transformed into one that was half human and half Baphomet with horns and a disfigured face that was covered in blood-oozing, rotting flesh. As the second draconian reached the twentieth lash, its whip got stuck into a big chunk of flesh on Jack's back. As the second draconian pulled and tugged repeatedly to get the whip out, Jack clenched his trembling hands into fists so tight that his palms dripped blood. He bit down hard on the cloth, shut his eyes tight, and yelled out.

He pressed his head so hard against the post that he felt throbbing pressure in the middle of his forehead. As the second draconian successfully ripped the whip out of Jack's back, blood splattered across Jack's face, and Jack broke into louder sobs. With his eyes turning back to solid white, Enki walked over to Jack, stooped in front of him, snatched the cloth down from Jack's mouth, and displayed an evil smile.

"Now, tell me that you have learned your lesson here, Jack," Enki said in a low, deep voice.

"I—I'm sorry," Jack said in a weak, low, tearful voice. "I'm sorry, I swear I won't ever use my abilities again. I swear, just please stop. Please, please."

As Jack lowered his head and once again broke into sobs, Enki lifted his head up by the chin and smiled.

"You remind me a little of my brother, Enlil," Enki replied, "he too is a pathetic, cowardly fucking scoundrel."

With a laugh, Enki stood to his feet and walked away.

"Cut him loose," Enki whispered to one of the draconians—



As Jack's mind drifted away from the memory it had revisited, he frowned, and tears clouded his eyes. He wanted out of The Summerland. He wanted to be free of the realm so bad, so he knew August was right. Jack needed Noah to be trained by August because Noah was his only hope at that moment. Noah was his only key to freedom. Hearing a scream coming from a female voice, Jack jumped up and ran to his bedroom window.

Looking out, he saw a young, adolescent girl being dragged over to the park area by several draconians, with Enki, his archons, and several citizens of The Summerland following behind. Rushing away from the window, Jack bolted out of the room. Running down the steps of his apartment building, he rushed to the park area and made his way to the front of the crowd. It was there that he saw the adolescent girl on her back, sobbing hysterically while two draconians were holding down her arms and legs. Enki smiled as he knelt beside her.

"What's happening?" Jack asked a guy standing beside him. "They caught her using abilities?"

"Worse," the guy replied, "her reincarnation period is over."

Frowning, Jack shot a glare over at the man.

"What? What does that mean?"

The man furrowed his brow and shook his head slowly.

"Please! No!" the girl yelled tearfully. "Please! Let me go again! I'm still useful! I swear!"

"Nah, ah, ah," Enki said in a sing-songy voice, "you're *all* used up

now, so there's only *one* thing left to do."

The girl's eyes widened as she shook her head with wildness.

"No, no, no!" the teen girl cried. "No! No! *Please!*"

As one of the draconians lifted the girl in the air, a small group of the citizens of The Summerland applauded and cheered. As the girl repeatedly screamed at the top of her lungs while struggling and fighting to get out of the clutches of the draconian holding her, her entire body became encased in a sheer, glowing, sparkling blue light. Enki smiled before walking over to the girl's head. As Enki opened his mouth as large and as wide as a crater, long, sharp, silver, rotating teeth that were shaped like sharp knives dropped down from the roof of his mouth.

In a swift motion, Enki dropped his open mouth down over the girl's head, biting into it and ripping her head off her shoulders. As blood splashed all over the citizens of The Summerland who were standing close by, a few of the citizens cheered and applauded even louder. As Jack gasped and gaped, his face turned pale white. The draconian dropped the girl's body, and immediately, Enki, the draconians and the archons tore into and bit at her body at rapid speed while growling in a loud, vibrating tone, resulting in blood splattering everywhere. The louder the cheers and applause grew from a few of the citizens of The Summerland, the louder the growling grew from Enki, the draconians, and the archons.

"No, no!" Jack said in a low voice while backing away. "No—this can't be *happening!* This can't be real! It *can't* be *real!*"

Clutching his stomach, Jack could feel bile rush up to his throat, burning it. Spinning around, Jack bolted over to a nearby trash can, dropped his head into it, and vomited. After a few seconds, an older woman walked over to him and put her hand on his back, staring at him with a frown.

"Hey, are you all right?" the woman asked, her brows furrowed

together.

With a deep frown, Jack shook his head while leaning over the trash can.

“What the hell is *wrong* with them?” Jack shouted. “How in the *hell* can they *be* so goddamned *evil*?”

“Her soul could no longer reincarnate,” the woman replied flatly, “she had already done about eight to nine hundred reincarnated lifetimes. The most recent incarnation she had was supposed to last a long time, but because her soul just couldn’t *stick* to it anymore, the incarnation only lasted two months before she returned right back here. Her soul was basically disintegrating. So with that, Enki and his servants ate what was left of her soul.”

Jack shot his head up at the woman with widened eyes.

“*What?* What do you mean they ate what was left of her soul? What—what are you *talking* about?”

The woman looked away and shrugged carelessly.

“When your soul no longer has the energy to reincarnate, it’ll begin to separate from any body it’s reincarnated into, and then it goes into a slow disintegration, but before the disintegration can complete, Enki and his servants will eat whatever’s left of it up.”

Jack’s eyes widened, and he swallowed hard at hearing that. Clutching his chest, he could feel his heart pounding through his fingers. Closing his eyes with a frown, he knew he had to regain his composure to truly understand what was being told to him at that moment.

“Jesus Christ,” Jack said while briefly holding his head and shaking it, “are you saying that’s what’s going to happen to *all* of us? *All* of us *here*?”

The woman nodded with a blank expression.

“Yeah, it’s just the way it is.”

Before Jack could ask the woman anything else, she turned and walked away, leaving Jack speechless. He couldn’t believe what he had

just heard. He now knew that The Summerland wasn't just a horrible place; it was something much *worse*. As he turned back around and saw Enki and his servants still devouring the girl's flesh, organs, and now her pineal gland, Jack's brows furrowed, and tears clouded his eyes. Light perspiration broke out on his forehead, his chest tightened and ached, his entire body felt as cold as ice, and he felt as if a thousand needles were stabbing him all over his legs. He wondered how many reincarnated lifetimes he had previously, and would his next one be his *last* before he too suffered a similar fate as the girl?

Amagi

"Man, I can't *believe* you and Hazel went through all that," Christopher said as he sat across from Noah in the kitchen of August's home.

Noah nodded as he looked up from his cup of coffee and glanced over at Hazel, sitting on the living room floor, watching cartoons.

"It was horrible," Noah said in almost a low voice. "When Hazel died, I just knew that I couldn't go on any further. I just—I felt like I had nothing else to live for, you know? Now, I wish—well, I wish a lot of things."

"Like what?" Christopher asked.

Noah briefly compressed his lips before sighing with a brief close of his eyes.

"I just feel like—*all* of this is my fault," Noah said, "my father, Leah's death, your death, Hazel's—"

"Whoa, whoa, hold on, how is what happened to your father your fault? Noah, you were a little kid; there was nothing you could do to save him from cancer."

"No, but I could've saved him from going to The Summerland,"

Noah replied. "I mean, when I was a kid, I always researched things in books. Why didn't I—why didn't I *think* to research whether Christianity was even real or not and research into what happens after death?"

Christopher sighed with a slight shake of his head.

"Yeah, but that still doesn't make his death *your* fault. Nor is it your fault that Leah, Hazel, and I died."

"Yeah, but Christopher—"

"No, Noah, look," Christopher cut in, "you have to stop thinking *coulda*, *woulda*, *shoulda*. The fact of the matter is that you're here *now*, and even though Leah is in Klipoth and Jack is in The Summerland, they're still—*here* in the afterlife too, and once we get them away from Enki, you can have that great life that you never had on Earth, and you can have it with Leah, Hazel and Jack. The question is, are you willing to really fight for it?"

As Noah stared into his cup of coffee, Christopher's words penetrated his mind. Was he willing to fight for himself, Leah, Hazel, and Jack to have the life he always dreamed of? Sure, he agreed to let August train him, but was he *really* willing to go toe to toe with a god bigger than him—and, as *he* felt in his mind, more *powerful* than him?

"He's right," August said as he appeared behind Noah in the kitchen. "Are you willing to fight for it? Are you ready to start training?"

Noah's eyes widened and his brows raised.

"What, *now*?"

"No, next week," August said with a brow raised and a half-smile.

"Yes, now, if you really want to help your family."

Before Noah could respond, August headed for the patio door that led to his backyard. Swallowing hard, Noah clutched his stomach, feeling it tighten and cramp. It wasn't that Noah was nervous; it was that he was *afraid*, afraid of failing. Glancing over at Christopher, Christopher gave a simple nod towards him with a brow raised, and Noah knew what that look meant.

“Hazel, we’re going to go out to the backyard for a little bit, okay?” Christopher said.

“Okay, Uncle Christopher,” Hazel responded, not once taking her eyes off the cartoon on television.

As Noah walked with Christopher to the backyard, each step made his legs feel icy cold and wobbly. Not knowing what type of training August would put him through was starting to get him. August nodded as Noah stood beside Christopher, a few feet away from him.

“Okay,” August began, “what I’m going to teach you are things that are already inside you; you just don’t know it yet. They’re abilities. I have them, your father has them, Christopher has them, Leah has them, hell, even Hazel has them, and by the end of our training, you’ll know how to use each and every one of them.”

Noah frowned and then raised a brow.

“I remember, one time when I was on earth, I was getting robbed, and—I don’t know how it all happened, but I reached my hand out and fire shot out of my palm, and the guy robbing me went flying through the air and was knocked unconscious.”

August stared at Noah with a deep frown and squinted eyes for a few seconds before looking away, shaking his head, and silently laughing.

“What?” Noah asked with a brow raised. “What’s funny?”

“Nothing,” August said with a slight shrug and shake of his head and a faint smile. “What you used was the sedation blast ability. You used the power of fire and electricity that’s within your palms to render him unconscious.”

Noah’s eyes widened, and he blinked repeatedly as he stared down at his hands. He had always heard of abilities and powers before, but only in films like *X-Men* and *The Avengers*. He had no idea that he or anyone else could actually utilize those abilities and powers in real life.

“Whoa, wait,” Christopher said, “so you mean we all actually have like—Superman powers and shit?”

August laughed.

“No,” August replied with a smile, “I mean, we all actually have like—*godlike* powers and shit. Now, shall we begin?”

Squinting his eyes, August frowned as he looked up at the sky that displayed dark gray clouds slowly moving in.

“Something tells me our time is limited,” August said.

The Summerland

As Jack lay asleep in bed, he heard yelling, screaming, and crying from numerous voices—men, women, and children. He heard loud, demonic yelling from numerous disembodied voices. As he turned his head from left to right with a deep frown, he thought the sounds were coming from a nightmare he was having. However, as he heard the loud sound of glass shattering, Jack shot up in bed with widened eyes and a loud gasp. As he continued to hear the yelling, screaming, and crying, he knew the sounds weren’t coming from any nightmare; the sounds were *real*. Jumping out of bed, he rushed to his bedroom window and looked out. His eyes widened as he saw nothing but thick clouds of black smoke surrounding the city of The Summerland.

Jack darted his eyes over at the calendar on the wall. It was Thursday, Enki’s energy harvesting ritual wasn’t until Friday. Snatching up his sneakers and baseball cap, Jack hurriedly yanked them on and then rushed out. As he opened the door to his apartment building, his nose was immediately greeted with the strong smell of sulfur and rotting flesh, the usual sign that let all the residents of The Summerland know that archons and draconians were roaming the city in droves. Hearing a loud, booming voice to the left of him, Jack looked over at the park area

and saw every citizen of The Summerland surrounded around Enki, his archons, and draconians in the park. As Jack walked over to the park, every step he took made his stomach twist in tight knots that gave him stomach cramps. He could feel his heart beat faster, and he had no real idea why.

“Because of this upcoming war, things are going to change *every* goddamn day!” Enki shouted at the top of his lungs, his nostrils flaring and his eyes converting to a bright, fiery red. “*Every* goddamn day, *every* goddamn hour, we will slam three of you odious fucking sons of bitches, one by one, on that goddamn recycling slab over there and fucking shoot you back down to our goddamn domain!”

As several of the citizens of The Summerland gasped, Jack’s eyes widened. He swallowed hard as he felt a burning in his throat.

“Anyone of you who *attempts* leaving,” Enki continued, “will face the most severe goddamned form of punishment—this is not a motherfucking *promise*; it is a goddamn *guarantee*! It will be your *duty* as citizens of The Summerland to watch each and *every* fucking bastard that gets discharged back down to our domain. It will be *fucking mandatory*! The first group to go will be in one hour—at *random*! Now go!”

As the citizens of The Summerland continued to stand there in front of Enki, some while weeping, Enki clenched his jaw and displayed a deep frown.

“I said *go*! Get the *fuck* out of my goddamn *sight* until it’s time for the transmigration to *begin*!” Enki shouted at the top of his lungs.

As Jack walked back up the stairs of his apartment building, each step his foot landed on sent burning pain through the veins and muscles in his legs, making them feel as if they were being scalded. He could barely turn the doorknob to his apartment unit as his hands were not only shaking; they also felt weak. Walking inside his apartment, he slammed the door and slammed his back up against the door as tears

clouded his eyes. He prayed to—whoever was outside The Summerland that he wouldn't be one of the many groups of three that would be called to be reincarnated, to be put on a slab and fried with thousands of fiery, electric jolts.

However, somehow, he felt he *could* be, and if he were, he knew he would never see his son again. He'd never see his daughter-in-law and granddaughter. He would potentially never be Jack Hunter again. He *had* to do something, but *what*? Jack heard what Enki said; if he even thought of trying to escape using one of his abilities, he could forget about reincarnation; instead, he could face being completely devoured by Enki and his people.

After several minutes, Jack sat on the floor, rested his head against his wrists, closed his eyes for a few seconds, and released a loud, heavy exhale. There was nothing he could do to stop what might potentially happen to him, and he *knew* it, or at least that's how it felt to him anyway. He also knew there was no way Noah and August could save him before the first round of were put up for reincarnation. Jack was sure there was no way August had trained Noah that fast. No, if Jack were one of the souls to be reincarnated, he'd just have to accept it; he'd have to accept the fact that he would be permanently, forever doomed by the hands of Enki.

Amagi

"Now, the first thing you have to learn to do is how to teleport," August said as he stood in front of Noah and Christopher. "Teleporting is how you're going to be able to get yourself out of hairy situations and how you'll be able to transport people from one place to the other. So, the first thing to do is close your eyes and picture yourself at the far end

of the yard.”

After sighing loudly, Noah closed his eyes, followed by Christopher doing the same.

“Okay,” August said, “both of you, get a clear picture in your head of the far end of the backyard, and immediately, you’ll find yourself there.”

After a few seconds, Christopher vanished into thin air from where he was standing next to Noah and teleported to the far end of the backyard behind August. Opening his eyes, Christopher looked all around the backyard with a smile.

“Oh my God,” Christopher said, “it worked. I can’t believe it; it worked.”

August turned around and smiled at Christopher before nodding.

“Of course it worked,” August said. “It’s the power of thought intention.”

Sighing, August turned back around to Noah, who still had his eyes closed and a faint frown on his face.

“Noah,” August said with a brow raised, “why aren’t you at the far end of the yard with Christopher?”

“Because this is hard,” Noah said in a low voice. “I’m trying to picture it, but my mind keeps thinking up all of these other—*thoughts*.”

As August frowned, he walked closer to Noah.

“Force them out of your mind, Noah,” August said, “Clear your mind of nothing but the far end of the yard.”

Biting down hard on his lower lip, Noah frowned more. Despite trying as hard as he could to clear his mind, he just couldn’t. The thought of Christopher, August, and him going to battle against Enki kept running through his mind. *What if I can’t get these abilities? What if we lose against Enki? What if Enki somehow entraps us in The Summerland to where we can’t get out no matter what? What if I can’t get Leah out of a hellish area that’s so big and filled with so many of*

Enki's—demons? What if I can't get to Dad in time?

August sighed with a roll of his eyes.

"Noah, you're still in *front* of me; why?" August asked.

"I'm trying to clear my thoughts, but it's hard," Noah said.

"Try harder," August persisted.

"Okay," Noah said before sighing with a slight shake of his head.

"Try *harder*, Noah," August said firmly.

"Okay," Noah repeated.

"Damn it, *come on!*" August shouted.

"I'm trying, but I can't do it!" Noah yelled back while shooting open his eyes and pacing back and forth.

"What's wrong?" Christopher asked as he walked up beside August. "Why hasn't he teleported yet?"

"Because he's not concentrating on what he has to do," August said while staring at Noah, "which means he's not giving it his hardest, best effort—"

"I *am*, August," Noah snapped, "but it's not that easy to just clear my mind of everything and just—*teleport*."

"Really? Because Christopher just did it *effortlessly*," August said with brows raised.

"Yeah, I guess so," Noah replied, "Christopher's been believing in—*spirituality* practically all his damn life, while I've been believing in Jesus since I was a kid."

"Yeah, but I never knew I could teleport like those people on Star Trek and all that though," Christopher replied with a light laugh from August.

"Look, Noah, let's try again," August said. "Close your eyes and clear your mind. Let your mind become empty of thoughts; let's start with that first."

Sighing, Noah slowly closed his eyes, and for a few seconds, silence filled the backyard.

"Is your mind empty?" August asked after the seconds had passed.

"Uh—yeah," Noah responded after two seconds, "clear and open."

"Good," August replied, "that's good; now, picture yourself at the far end of the backyard."

"How will I know I'm there?" Noah asked.

"You'll know," August replied. "The IS-BE, which is you, will tell you telepathically."

Noah slowly exhaled.

"All right," Noah said.

After several seconds with Noah remaining in front of August, August sucked his teeth, sighed, and rolled his eyes.

"Noah, you're *not* picturing it," August snapped, "come on, already."

"I *am* picturing it!" Noah yelled. "It's in my head right now—"

"No, because if it were, you would be at the far end of the *backyard* already, Jesus Christ!"

August turned away from Noah, lowered his head, and pressed his fingers to his eyes as he let out a loud sigh and frowned.

"This is ridiculous; I can't do this," Noah said while opening his eyes and turning to walk back into the house.

"Okay, okay, wait, hold it," Christopher said, grabbing Noah's arm and pulling him back. "Look, what's going on, Noah? Why aren't you getting this?"

"I don't know; I *swear* I don't know, Christopher. It just—it *feels* like I'm picturing it, but—"

"You *aren't*, Noah," August said in a firm tone as he walked back over to Noah. "You may *feel* like you are, but it's *not* happening. Look, try again. Come on, close your eyes."

Noah stared at August with a brow raised. In all of Noah's years as an adult, he wasn't used to being *told* what to do in the ways of a

command, especially from someone like August, whom he didn't know all that well. However, letting out a short, forced breath, Noah closed his eyes with a deep frown.

"Drop the frown and let your face relax, Noah," August said with a brow raised.

"Really?" Noah asked while opening his eyes and raising a brow of his own. "Seriously? Like—"

"Yes, seriously, *fix* your face," August responded sharply, "that's probably another reason why it's not working. You look like you have an attitude problem right now. It'll only work if you're relaxed."

Sighing, Noah's frown slowly disappeared from his face.

"Now, let your mind go blank," August said, "Forget Leah, forget Jack, forget Hazel, Enki, Christopher, me, forget everything and everyone. Let your mind go absolutely blank."

That was easier said than done for Noah because despite him trying to picture blackness behind his eyes, all that kept popping up behind his eyes were visions of Leah, Jack, Hazel, Enki, and even Christopher.

"Now picture the far end of the backyard," August said while staring directly at Noah, "don't *force* a picture of it. Just allow the image of it to float into your mind."

"Fine, okay," Noah said in a low voice.

August stared at Noah, who remained standing in front of him for several seconds, which then turned into an entire minute.

"Goddamn it," August said in a low voice before sighing, shaking his head and walking away.

Shooting open his eyes, Noah looked around him and saw he was still standing where he was. Glancing over at Christopher, Christopher looked away with a brow raised and a slight shake of his head.

"*Damn* it!" Noah shouted. "I don't know why I'm not getting this, August, I swear! I'm trying, I really am!"

Sighing again, August nodded.

"Yeah, it's—fine," August said, "okay, let's try another ability and pick back up on this one later, all right?"

Noah raised a brow at August.

"You're pissed at me, aren't you?" Noah asked. "I'm really trying, August. I'm not bullshitting you here—"

"I believe you, Noah, I do," August cut in. "Maybe it's just—maybe we just need to circle back around to this ability later. In the meantime, let's try something else; creating a force shield."

"What's a force shield?" Noah asked.

"It's an electric shield that you create with thought intention," August responded, "it's used to block Enki, his archons, draconians, reptilians, and anyone else who's an enemy to you from being able to attack and harm you."

Christopher whistled before lightly laughing.

"Wow," Christopher said, "it feels like I'm on an episode of Smallville right now or something."

"Well," August said with a faint smile, "from all the episodes I saw, unless I missed something, Clark never created a force shield, but he could emit heat and fire beams from his eyes like we can, though."

Christopher's eyes widened as Noah sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Wait, *what*?" Christopher said. "We've got *fire* eyes?"

August laughed.

"Well, it's not *quite* called that—but we'll talk about that later."

"Good, I'm glad you two's chit-chat is done," Noah said in an icy tone. "Perhaps we can get back *focused* here."

August tilted his head to the side and smirked at Noah with a brow raised.

"I *really* don't think you're the right one to tell us about getting *focused* right now, *okay*?" August said, resulting in Christopher snickering.

Noah stared at August with his nostrils flared and a frown as August and Christopher shared a laugh.

"Great, I'm glad you two find my difficulty in *mastering* these abilities funny," Noah said before turning and walking away, "really, thanks a lot."

"Oh, come on, Noah, wait," August said, grabbing Noah's arm. "I'm just joking with you, relax. Besides, maybe some humor might help you loosen up to be able to *ace* these abilities."

"Yeah, whatever, I guess you're right," Noah replied before sighing and walking back over to Christopher.

"Okay," August said, his facial expression turning serious, "now, this is one of the most important abilities for you both to master. It can literally be a lifesaver to and for you. So, what I want you both to do is close your eyes and picture yourself standing behind a huge, thick, blue, electrifying transparent shield."

As Christopher closed his eyes, Noah sighed before closing his. Within a few seconds, Christopher appeared behind a huge, thick, blue, electrifying transparent shield. Shooting open his eyes, Christopher widened them as he saw the shield he was behind. He was about to speak, but August frowned and put his finger to his mouth, motioning for him to remain quiet. After a couple of minutes, August sighed and shook his head.

"Noah, open your eyes," August said flatly.

"Did it work?" Noah said upon opening his eyes, "did—"

Noah stopped as he looked to his left and saw Christopher pacing behind the electrifying shield while staring at him with a brow raised.

"Damn," Noah said in a dejected tone.

"Damn is *right*, Noah," August said with a frown. "*Where's* your force shield? Why aren't you behind it?"

Noah sighed with a roll of his eyes.

"I was picturing it," Noah responded, "I was—"

"You *weren't*," August snapped, "because if you were, you would be *behind* it right now!"

"Well, look, what do you want me to *do*?" Noah snapped. "I mean, I'm doing everything you're telling me to—"

"Yeah, except you *aren't*, Noah!" August shouted. "For some reason, you're listening, but it's not registering in your *brain*!"

"Excuse me?" Noah shouted. "What the *hell* is that supposed to mean?"

As the electrifying shield Christopher was behind immediately vanished, Christopher rolled his eyes up while leaning his tongue into his cheek for a few seconds.

"Okay, hold on, you two," Christopher said, "let's not get into a shouting match here. Noah, come on. You're the smartest guy I know. You graduated from South Wesleyan University with honors; you have a bachelor's in education and another in writing. If anyone can learn something and master it down pact, it's you. So—no cap—what's going on, bruh?"

Noah closed his eyes for a few seconds while sighing with a slight shake of his head.

"I don't know," Noah replied in a low voice, "I think—I think it's August *pressuring* me."

"Whoa, wait a minute—*pressuring* you?" August snapped with furrowed brows. "Noah, I'm *not* pressuring you—"

"You *are*!" Noah shouted. "You expect me to get this all down within a matter of seconds, and I *can't*! This isn't some damn Marvel movie!"

"You're right; it *isn't*, Noah!" August yelled back. "It's *real life*! It's a *reality* here in the afterlife! These are all things that *anyone* can master! I can bring *Hazel* out here, and even *she* could master them because the only thing any of these abilities require are *thoughts* and

intention! Thinking turns to *intention*, and intention is when you *intend* on doing something or intend on having something happen, and from that intention comes *manifestation*! I can see not being able to really master these abilities on Earth because down there you're locked in a human *meat* suit, but up here, you're in your *ethereal* form, and so this should flow *easily* from you!"

Noah stared at August with a frown. He wanted so badly to knock the hell out of August, just so he could feel good for the moment.

"You know, you're really starting to get on my fucking nerves," Noah said in a cold tone.

"Good!" August snapped, "because you're already on *mine*! I mean, I *swear*, you have got to be *the* most difficult person I've ever met!"

"Really? And why is *that*, huh?" Noah yelled. "You're the one who—as I *said*, is putting added *pressure* on me, pressure of which I don't *need* right now—"

"Okay! Okay, wait, stop!" August shouted before briefly covering his face with his hands. "Look, we're not—we're not getting anywhere yelling at each other like this. All that's going to do is expel negative loosh energy, which will have Enki sending his archons crashing into this realm to destroy it and us, and I don't want his minions here."

Walking away from Noah and Christopher, August paced for a few seconds before walking back over to them.

"Look, okay, let's try another ability," August said, "and this should be an easier one for you. It just requires you thinking up the word of the ability in your mind. The ability is called fireball."

Turning to look at a table several feet away from him, Noah and Christopher, August squinted at the table, and within seconds, a thick, huge, square chunk of ice appeared on the table.

"Whoa, you just did that?" Christopher asked.

"Yeah," August answered while still staring at the table, "I told you, all it is is thoughts and intention. Now, Christopher, I'm going to try

this with just Noah this time. Noah, look, this should be easy. All you have to do is extend your arm out in the direction of the ice on the table and stretch your fingers apart from each other. With your palm facing in the direction of the ice and while staring at the ice, think up the word *fireball*. You only have to think the word up once, but when you think it up, put strong intention into it. Do you *think* you can do that?"

"Yeah, I *think* I can do that," Noah said sharply before rolling his eyes, stepping in front of August, and facing the table.

As Christopher stood beside Noah, August paced behind Noah, watching as Noah had his left arm extended out, his fingers stretched apart, and his palm facing the ice. *Fireball*. Noah briefly raised a brow as the ice remained untouched on the table. Shutting his eyes tight for a few seconds, Noah reopened them and widened them while continuing to stare at the ice. *Fireball*. As the ice remained untouched, Noah let out a short, sharp breath with a roll of his eyes.

"Try hard, Noah," August said.

"I *am*," Noah said while staring at the ice with a frown.

"No, you're *not* because nothing's happening," August said with a roll of his eyes and a shake of his head. "Try *harder*, *focus*, and use *intent*."

With a loud, annoyed sigh, Noah frowned more while staring at the ice. He extended his arm out even further. *Fireball*.

"Try *harder*, Noah," August said with a stern voice.

"I just *said* that I *am*," Noah replied, "I'm *trying*—"

"*Goddamn* it, no, you *aren't*!" August shouted as he stepped in front of Noah. "You *aren't* trying *hard* enough with intention!"

Noah's nostrils flared, and his face turned red.

"Yes I *am*!" Noah shouted. "This isn't easy though! You act like I'm supposed to naturally know how to do this; I bet you can't even do *any* of this shit yourself!"

"I *can*!" August shouted back. "Look!"

Turning around while focusing his eyes directly on the ice, August quickly extended his arm with his fingers stretched apart from each other and his palm facing the ice's direction. *Fireball*. Within seconds, the ice burst into a large ball of fire that vanished a few seconds later, resulting in the ice returning to its original state.

"Holy shit," Christopher said in an almost low tone and with widened eyes.

Noah's eyes widened slightly before he swallowed hard and displayed a deep frown.

"Now," August said, "either you're going to *get* serious about doing all of this or kiss your damn wife in Klipoth and your father in The Summerland goodbye! Let *me* know when you're ready to get serious!"

"I *am* serious!" Noah yelled as August walked away.

"You're *not*!" August shouted as he walked back over to Noah. "I can *read* you, Noah! I can read you *loud* and clear! You're *afraid*! You're afraid of making a mistake and you're afraid to *fail*, and your fears are resulting in you being afraid of even *attempting* to try! *That's* what's *blocking* your thoughts, which in turn is blocking your *intentions*! You *can't* be afraid to fail, and you *can't* be afraid to *try*! Your wife and your father are *counting* on you, damn it, and you're going to just *let* them down because of your *fears*? After *all* that Enki—*Lucifer* put you through, down on Earth and here in the afterlife, taking away your *father*, your *wife*, your friend and brother, and then your *daughter*! Taking away your *job*, your *home* and making you and your daughter suffer through *homelessness*!

Then, when you *get* to the afterlife, he had his Luciferian soldiers *beat* your ass, and *then* he *dropped* you down to Klipoth to endure *more* punishment! He did all that to you, which should *make* you *want* to master this so you *can* go to war against him and defeat him! All you have to do is *believe* with *intention* that failure is *not* an option, Noah, and it *won't* be! Fear of failure, fear of making a mistake and fear of

trying is for the *weak*, and that isn't you! I *know* it isn't! You're *better* than that! You can *do* this, Noah, because it's *in* you! You *have* the power in you! I can see it! It always *has* been in you! I *believe* in you, and I *know* you can do this! Now, when you start believing and knowing that you can, *you let me know!*"

Rolling his eyes at Noah, August turned and stormed towards the door of the house. With a frown, Noah lowered his head to the ground with his shoulders slumped. As he closed his tearful eyes, the vision of his wife and father immediately popped into his mind. Shooting open his eyes, Noah shot a fast glare over at the ice. Slowly, he extended his right arm; he spread his fingers apart from each other with his palm facing in the direction of the ice.

His eyes focused directly on the ice, but this time, he wasn't staring at the ice but directly *into* it, as if he could see inside it. *Fireball*. Within seconds of hearing a large whoosh behind him, August stopped, turned around, stared at the ice, and widened his eyes. The entire chunk of ice was engulfed in large flames that vanished a few seconds later, resulting in the ice returning to its original state.

"You *did* it!" Christopher said before breaking into laughter and hugging Noah. "I can't believe it, you did it, Noah!"

While hugging Christopher back, Noah smiled and let out a short, sharp breath before looking at August with a brow raised.

"Well," Noah said, "there you go, I did it, finally."

While walking back over to Noah, August nodded, slowly formed a smile, and pulled Noah into a hug.

"Yes! You did!" August exclaimed before laughing, "See? All it took was getting rid of your fears. I'm so proud of you, Noah. I knew you could do it. Welcome to godhood."

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Summerland

As Jack walked out of his apartment, his heart skipped a beat with each step he took towards the recycling machine where Enki, Enki's men, and other residents of The Summerland were. The fact that heavy, red smoke permeated the air of The Summerland made him more nervous and afraid. His insides felt hot like an inferno. He felt his stomach bubbling, which in turn made it cramp. His hands were clammy and shaking. His mouth felt dry, yet he kept swallowing down bile that kept trying to make its way up into his throat. As he walked to the front of the semicircle of residents, he swallowed hard and clenched his fists. He felt if he didn't look at Enki or his men in the eyes, perhaps he would somehow appear invisible to them; thus he wouldn't be called for reincarnation.

"The first—of *three!*" Enki shouted before displaying a wide, evil grin. "We shall begin *now!*"

Jack closed his eyes with a frown for several seconds. *Please don't call me, please don't call me, please don't call me, please—*

Jack stopped as he heard heavy breathing in front of him. He opened his eyes and saw Enki's gigantic face just inches away from his, with Enki's eyes glowing bright red.

"I can *hear* your goddamn *thoughts*, Hunter," Enki said in a disembodied, demonic voice. "*Shut the fuck up!*"

Jack blinked repeatedly. His heart rate increased, and the cramping in his stomach grew stronger. He broke out into a sweat on his forehead as he nodded.

"I'm—I'm sorry," Jack said in a low voice while looking down and

then away from Enki, "I'm sorry, it won't happen again."

Rolling his eyes, Enki swirled angrily away from Jack.

"Nergal!" Enki yelled out. "Grab the first IS-BE!"

A tall, brown, bony, scaly, reptile, saurian alien with horns raced over to a seven-year-old girl and grabbed her. The girl screamed and cried as her mother grabbed one of the girl's arms.

"No!" the mother cried. "Please! No! No!"

"Get off her, *bitch!* She's *ours!*" the Saurian said with a slow pronunciation before hissing.

"Mama! Mama, don't let them take me!" the girl cried as she was dragged away.

"No! Please! *Please!*" the mother sobbed as she ran after her daughter.

"Get *back*, you fucking *imbecile!*" Enki shouted, his eyes instantly changing from glowing white to glowing red. "Get back, or we will fucking devour you *next!*"

As the saurian alien slammed the girl's body down on the slab of the recycling machine, the mother fought to get free from two draconians that were holding her arms, preventing her from running to the recycling machine. After the electrodes were put on both sides of the girl's head and her wrists and ankles were strapped down, Enki lifted his arm and hand to the sky, and out of nowhere, a gigantic, golden trident appeared in Enki's hand. Enki pointed the trident at the thick, steel rings of the table, causing a thick, sparkly, electrifying flame to shoot out of the trident and into the rings. Instantly, thick, blue, and white electricity jolted up and down the rings, causing the girl to convulse with severity.

Jack looked away with a frown as tears clouded his eyes. He felt his chest burning with pain at seeing the torture of the child in front of his eyes. As the girl's screams turned to hysterical sobs, hearing the mother's loud, uncontrollable sobs made several residents of The

Summerland break into sobs as well. Jack gasped slightly as he immediately felt numerous clots of piercing, throbbing, pulsating pain explode all over his body at the same time, making him feel as if someone were ripping the skin and flesh off him with their bare hands. He felt his throat burning like fire while tightening to where breathing felt almost impossible.

He thought that that must have been how the girl was feeling at that moment, but he couldn't imagine why he would be feeling her pain. As Enki dropped his head back and let out a loud, thunderous, roaring laugh, his archons and draconians did as well, their laughter sounding like a million disembodied, echoing, howling voices all wrapped into one. As the girl's body became engulfed in a thick, white ball of electricity and fire, every blood vessel and organ in her body exploded out as if her body were filled with numerous bombs.

Blood splattered all over the ground, Enki, his draconians, archons, residents, and Jack. The louder the girl's screams were, the faster the electricity jolts went up and down the rings of the table. Seconds later, the girl's body transformed into a big, thick, blue, electrifying ball of light that shot up off the table, beamed through the net surrounding the city, and out into the big, black sky that was filled with numerous, enormously large stars and vanished into thin air. Her muffled screams and cries could still be heard throughout the area for several seconds before there was nothing heard but the weeping of some of the residents of The Summerland.

"The second of the three will begin in thirty minutes!" Enki shouted with a loud yell. "Return back here then, *all* of you, or face *punishment!*"

As the residents walked away, the two draconians holding the mother dropped the mother's arms before walking away with Enki and the other draconians and archons and then vanishing into thin air. As the mother collapsed to the ground on her knees, she continued sobbing

uncontrollably. Jack stared at her with his brows furrowed. He could still feel a sharp burning in his chest, and he knew why. Walking over to her, he stooped down and touched her back.

"I'm so sorry," Jack said in a low voice. "I—"

"Get off me!" the mother interjected tearfully. "Don't fucking touch me! Leave me *alone*! Everyone here watched and did *nothing*, don't fucking touch me!"

Before Jack could say anything else, the mother got to her feet and ran away. Jack thought to go after her, but why would he? What could he possibly say to make her feel better about the fact that she had just lost her daughter? Her *child*? Jack knew that feeling, especially since he had been reunited with his son, and then realized he'd have to be without him again. As Jack turned and stared at the recycling machine that was dripping droplets of the girl's flesh and blood from its rings, he rolled his tearful eyes. Since being in The Summerland, Jack had seen numerous people get tortured and ripped apart on that machine more times than he could count, but only now was it *really* starting to get to him. He felt as if he were seconds away from mentally cracking up at that moment. He clenched his hands into fists as he shook his head slightly.

"I—I can't do this anymore," Jack said in a tearful, low tone, "I don't think I can endure this any longer. August—August, if you can hear me, *please* help me. I need to get out of here."

"Well," Noah said as he walked into the kitchen, where August and Christopher sat at the table. "Hazel is asleep on the sofa, which is good."

"It is," August replied while getting up and walking over to the coffee maker, "it'll give us more time to train."

August walked over to Noah and handed him a cup of coffee.

"Here, you're going to need this though because we'll probably be training for a few more hours."

"I'm still surprised that we all can get tired here," Noah said. "I mean—because we're dead. How can we be tired? Or like with Hazel sleeping, how can that even be?"

"Well, first, you have to stop saying that," August said, "we're alive, we're just in another realm. Just because our *physical* bodies died, that doesn't mean our *ethereal* souls died as well. A physical death is just that—a *physical* death, but there's no such thing as a *soul* death or, as I call it, an IS-BE death. There is such a thing as an IS-BE *devourment*, though, but not an IS-BE death."

Noah nodded.

"Hmm, okay, I never looked at it that way."

"Yeah, I can see how that would make sense," Christopher chimed in.

"Yup, so I created this realm whereas anyone in it could still experience feeling sleepy, hungry, thirsty," August said, "you know, all the *good* feelings and urges we had down on Earth."

"Including sexual desires?" Christopher asked with a brow raised, resulting in Noah laughing.

August glanced at him with squinted eyes and a frown before laughing quietly.

"Um, yeah," August replied, "I created this realm to include the existence of husbands and wives and boyfriends and girlfriends, just like on Earth, so yeah."

Christopher nodded with a serious expression.

"Does racism exist here in Amagi?" Christopher asked.

August raised a brow and frowned faintly and briefly, but the faintness of the gesture did not hide the sudden shift in his demeanor. He shifted his weight in his seat, his jaw tightening slightly as he broke

eye contact with Christopher. The question was a razor-sharp reminder of the complex, painful reality that had remained prevalent everywhere on Earth, and even in this liberated space, the topic carried an inherited, collective weight that made him visibly uncomfortable.

He felt the immediate, unpleasant pressure of the topic—a topic that, for all its necessity, was deeply rooted in the low vibrations of the Matrix and was jarring to encounter here. He quickly lifted his coffee cup, taking a long, deliberate sip, using the pause to compose himself. He looked directly at Christopher, his expression now one of absolute, unyielding seriousness.

“No, absolutely not, and I’ll kick someone out of this realm *really* quick for that shit. And it’s not tolerated anywhere else in Pleroma either,” August replied, his voice firm and unwavering, without a trace of the previous lightness. “I couldn’t stand racism on Earth and I still detest it here and now. The idea that any IS-BE would carry that low-vibrational poison into this place—or Pleroma, period—is offensive.”

Christopher nodded with a brief and faint smile before taking a sip of his coffee.

“What did you mean earlier when you said you could read me?” Noah asked.

“Well, as you know and saw, I have abilities, Noah. I can levitate, I have what’s called *eyeshock*—”

“The fire eyes, right?” Christopher asked with widened eyes and an excited smile.

“Fire eyes,” Noah said with a brief smirk, “sounds like a character from one of those Captain America movies.”

Noah and Christopher laughed. August briefly frowned and smirked while leaning his tongue into his cheek.

“Yeah,” August replied, “well, the correct name of it is *eyeshock* though, but I also have—teleportation abilities, fire shooting abilities, and a whole lot more. One of my favorite abilities is being able to see

inside someone's IS-BE and read *everything* about it. In the backyard, I read yours; from the day I showed up on your doorstep until the day you took your physical life, I read everything. I also read that like Christopher here, you too have—a *great* ability to do what seems impossible in this afterlife, Noah. You're *afraid* though, and you shouldn't be because you *can* win this battle. All *three* of us can win this battle; the fear just has to be put aside for us to do so."

Noah looked down and into his coffee cup with a troubled frown.

"I'm sorry," Noah said in a low voice.

August raised a brow and frowned at Noah.

"No, you're not," August said with a shake of his head.

Noah raised his brows at August.

"Excuse me?"

"When you say I'm sorry, what you're saying is that you're a sorry person," August said. "You're essentially insulting yourself and cursing yourself and putting the feeling into your existence that you are a sorry person, and words are spells, and words have power. Before you know it, you'll go around actually *being* a sorry person; you'll start acting pathetic and pitiful, and you'll generally be looked at by others as undesirable to even want to be around. Despite the fact that I *loathe* the Bible, my mother made me memorize the Bible from front to back growing up, and—so I remember that in Proverbs 18:21, it says that death and life are in the power of the tongue. So instead of saying I'm sorry, you should say I apologize. Just like the word weekdays, when you break it down, it means you're in a *weak daze*. With the word weekend, when you break it down, it means your body becomes and is *weakened*."

"Yeah, I knew that," Christopher said.

August nodded and smiled before he and Christopher exchanged a fist bump.

"Hmm, okay, that—actually makes sense," Noah said. "Well, August, I apologize."

"For what?" August asked.

"Each time you showed up on my doorstep, I was a complete asshole to you, and yet, you turned around and gave up your life for me—"

"No, wait," August said as he sat up in his chair with a brief frown before letting out a short, breathed laugh. "I gave up my *life* for you? That sounds so—Jesus-like, and I don't want to be compared to that split-personality nut in any way. I *unplugged* from the matrix sounds better."

Noah looked down briefly and let out a breathed laugh of his own while nodding.

"Okay, you *unplugged* from the matrix then, for me, and so—if we do win this battle and I save my wife and father, it'll be because of you. So, I apologize, and—I thank you."

August briefly glanced away with a smile and then a shake of his head.

"You're welcome, Noah, but—you don't have to apologize to me. I mean—look, I had two very religious parents myself, one who crammed nothing but Christianity, twenty-four seven, seven days a week down my throat. Nothing nor anyone could tell either of them otherwise about God because they were so deeply rooted in their beliefs. So, I get it; for so long, you thought God—Jesus was your—*savior*, when what he *really* was was your enemy. I'm just glad you finally came around, and I'm glad you allowed me to be your trainer in this battle."

"You're more than my trainer," Noah said, "you're my friend."

"Hey, same here," August said with a smile while extending his hand to Noah. Noah shook it and pulled August into a hug, which August embraced.

"Now that I'm no longer a Christian though," Noah said, "I—I don't even know *who* I *am* anymore."

"How so?" August asked with a brow raised. "What do you

mean?”

Noah looked down with a frown and a shake of his head.

“For so long,” Noah said, “Christianity was a part of my identity; hell, it *was* my identity. It was what I could hide behind when I felt sad, depressed, or scared—it was my shield, and it defined my life. Now that I no longer have that, it feels like—”

Noah stopped as his eyes lightly watered.

“I just feel—*alone*. I feel like a nobody now, and like I don’t even have an identity anymore.”

August sighed while briefly looking down, frowning and shaking his head.

“Noah, your identity isn’t a *religion*,” August said, “your identity is that of being a divine spark, a powerful, immortal IS-BE who can do *anything* at any time, and you *aren’t* alone. You do have your father, you have your daughter, you’ll soon have your wife back, you have Christopher here, and—you have me. We’re all here for you, and you certainly are *not* a nobody, Noah, but see, *that’s* what religion does though.

It makes people feel so small and unimportant compared to the god that they’re being brainwashed into serving. Religion ruins and strips away a person’s *true* identity and self-esteem and turns them into nothing but mindless slaves carrying out a poisonous mission that only serves to destroy the person until there’s nothing of that person left. So *don’t* feel that way—okay? You no longer being a Christian should make you feel empowered and *free*, free to be the amazing person you were *truly* meant to be.”

“Yeah,” Noah said, nodding. “You’re right, thank you.”

August nodded with a faint smile while patting Noah on the back.

“Okay, so I have another question,” Christopher said with a frown and a slight tilt of his head. “August, have you ever used any of your abilities to like—hook up with any women here?”

Noah laughed as August silently laughed, turned to him, and squinted while faintly frowning and half-smiling.

"Is he always like this?" August asked Noah.

Noah laughed as Christopher shrugged, slightly shook his head, frowned, and displayed an amused smirk.

"What?" Christopher said with a half-smile, "it is a valid question, I'm just *saying*."

Noah playfully rolled his eyes and shook his head with a faint smile.

"Yeah...August, you should've seen what he was like down on *Earth*," Noah joked before lightly laughing.

Smiling, Christopher shook his head and playfully flipped Noah the bird, resulting in August and Noah laughing.

"Well, good then," August said with a faint smile, "Amagi's got enough solemn sages and brooding heroes—we could use a resident comedian."

Christopher laughed.

"Perfect," Christopher replied. "Yeah, I'll do stand-up every Friday, but listen, I ain't performing for—cosmic *breadcrumbs* or nothing like that. You gotta pay *me* in real Amagi money or manifest—some—Mario *gold* coins or some shit, bruh, cause ain't no way in *hell* I'm working for free."

August let out a hearty, hard laugh, a deep, joyful sound that echoed his amusement. It was a laugh that Noah immediately joined in on.

"Man," August said with a smile, "that's the hardest I've laughed in a *long* time. You've got skills, Chris."

Christopher nodded with a warm smile, silently acknowledging the compliment.

"Yeah, but Chris," Noah said with a faint frown and a brow raised, "hold on—August is wearing a *wedding* band, so he's married."

August's smile disappeared and he shifted in his seat uncomfortably before sighing and staring down into his coffee cup.

"Oh, my bad, man, with everything going on, I never even paid attention to that," Christopher asked. "Okay, so I take it she's still alive then?"

August faintly frowned, and his eyes glistened. He remained quiet for a few seconds.

"August?" Noah said.

"She died," he said in a low tone, "she died in childbirth on our anniversary."

"Jesus," Noah said before looking away with a deep frown.

"Oh," Christopher said with a frown, "oh, hey, look, when I asked about you hooking up with women here, I was just joking, no cap. Had I known about—"

August shook his head while blinking back tears.

"No, it's fine," August cut in, in a low voice, "you didn't know."

"So, is she in *The Summerland* too?" Noah asked.

August frowned more, sighed, and then bit down on his lower lip. He felt his chest mildly burning; he felt his eyes stinging with water at the very thought of where his wife was. Once again, he blinked back tears while swallowing hard.

"She's been reincarnated already," August replied in a low, tearful voice. "So, I'll—*never* see her again, unfortunately. I'll never even get to meet our son we would've had together. I—still wear my wedding band because—even though she's gone, she's still my wife. So, just as I did when she was alive, I've never taken it off, not to shower, not to wash dishes, nothing."

Noah frowned, and his eyes softened while staring at August.

"August, I'm sorr—I mean—I apologize," Noah said.

"Yeah, me too," Christopher chimed in. "That must be *devastating*."

August sat silently while still staring into his cup with a frown. He clenched his jaw tightly, a futile effort to stem the tide of emotions surging within him. In an attempt to hold back the tears that were threatening to erupt, he tightened his right fist until his knuckles turned white with the strain. However, despite his best efforts, the tears came anyway, spilling over in silent streams from his eyes.

“So,” Christopher said, “how many years had you and your wife—”

“Look, I *really* don’t want to talk about this anymore, okay? Let’s go back outside and get back to training,” August responded in a voice that was steady but thick with emotion.

Before Noah or Christopher could say anything else, August rose to his feet and quickly wiped his tears away while walking towards the sink.

“Now, Christopher, Noah, remember,” August said as he circled them repeatedly, “fear is the enemy of your mind. Defeat it like you plan to defeat evil, and you can master anything you put your intentions on. On the count of three, close your eyes, one, two, three.”

Slowly, Noah and Christopher closed their eyes.

“I want you to picture yourselves floating above the ground,” August said as he stopped in front of them. “Use your thought intention to manifest it to happen.”

After a few seconds, both Noah and Christopher levitated in midair. August smiled and then silently laughed.

“Are we doing it?” Christopher asked. “I feel like I’m floating.”

“Open your eyes and see for yourself,” August said.

As Christopher and Noah opened their eyes and stared down at the ground, Noah’s eyes widened as Christopher gasped.

“Holy *shit*!” Noah exclaimed. “It worked! It *worked*!”

“How is this even possible?” Christopher asked with an excited

smile. "I mean, I get we have abilities and everything but—"

"You used your thought intention, remember?" August answered with a smile and a slight nod towards Christopher. "As I said before, intention turns into manifestation, which, as a result, makes you *very* powerful."

"Okay, so what now?" Noah asked before yawning. "I mean, how long can we remain in the air?"

"For as long as you want," August replied, "but for now, I want you to think in your mind of the word grounded. Think it once and remember, think it with intention."

Noah and Christopher closed their eyes.

"No," August said, "think it with your eyes open. Having your eyes closed was just to get you started with these abilities. You need to be able to do them whether you have your eyes open or closed, like I can. Keep your eyes open and use your mental intent on the word."

Noah and Christopher stared at the ground. *Grounded*. Within a second, Noah and Christopher floated back down to the ground, resulting in August clapping and laughing loudly.

"Yes!" August shouted before hugging them both. "You two *did* it! I'm so proud!"

"I am too," Christopher said, half-smiling. "No cap, I really think we're going to kick some serious *ass* when we go to war against Enki."

Noah and August laughed.

"Well, let's not celebrate yet," August said. "We still have to tackle the other abilities, but remember, you can use levitation when trying to jump over your opponent or trying to fly over things; it's helpful in a lot of ways."

"I want to learn the eyeshock ability next," Christopher said with briefly raised brows.

"Yeah, I do, too," Noah said with a brief frown and a smirk. "It does sound pretty amazing."

“Okay,” August said before turning behind him and staring at the table a few feet behind him.

He stared at it with squinted eyes, and within seconds, thick, red beams of light blasted out of his eyes and into the middle of the table, igniting it on fire. Noah gaped as Christopher raised his brows.

“Wow,” Christopher said with a frown.

August shrugged with a smirk while turning to face them.

“It’s what you two can do too. All you have to think of is one word—eyeshock—think of it once and think of it with intention, try it.”

As August stepped to the side, Noah and Christopher stared at the table. *Eyeshock*. Within seconds, thick, orange beams of light blasted out of Christopher’s eyes, and thick, blue beams of light blasted out of Noah’s eyes and into the table, igniting the entire table on fire. August smiled, and his eyes brightened immediately. He had used his eyeshock ability a few times himself, but seeing other people use it excited him like a little boy waking up to Christmas presents.

“All right,” August said while smiling for a few seconds more before displaying a serious expression, “now think of the words, pull back—once.”

Within seconds, the beams of lights in Noah and Christopher’s eyes zapped back towards their eyes and vanished into thin air. August nodded with a brief smirk before stepping back in front of them.

“You think of the word *eyeshock* once to initiate it; you think of the words, *pull back* once to stop it,” August said, “got it?”

“Got it, yeah,” Christopher said with a nod.

“Yeah,” Noah chimed in before a long yawn escaped from him.

August smiled at Noah with a brow raised.

“You’re tired,” August said.

“Well—a little, yeah,” Noah said with a brief smile, a slight shrug, and a shake of his head, resulting in August expressing a breathed laugh.

“Well, we’re almost done for the day here,” August replied, “but

right now, let's go back to teleportation. Christopher, you already got this down, but Noah, it's your time to try again. Only don't close your eyes. Just picture in your mind the far end of the backyard—with intention."

Slowly sighing, Noah blinked repeatedly while staring at the far end of the backyard behind August. Within seconds, Noah vanished into thin air and instantly teleported to the far end of the backyard.

"I'll be damned; he did it right this time," Christopher said with a smile.

"Yes!" August shouted with a big smile before clapping and laughing loudly.

Noah looked all around the area he was in with a smile before walking back over to where August and Christopher were.

"Holy fuckamoly, I actually did it," Noah said with a smile, "I—*wow*, I can't believe I actually did it."

August slightly tilted his head to the side and then frowned at Noah with a smile.

"Holy—fuckamoly? There's a term I've never heard before."

Noah and Christopher laughed.

"Yeah, it's something my dad used to slip up and say when he would get really angry," Noah replied.

August nodded with raised brows before lightly laughing.

"Hmm, hilarious; I like it," August said. "I'll remember to use that the next time you get on my nerves."

Christopher and August laughed as Noah stared at him with a brow raised.

"Good," Noah said while looking away with a faint smile and a shake of his head, "because I already have a term that I think of in *my* mind when you get on mine."

August looked down and laughed with a shake of his head.

"Let me guess: 'amazing'?" August replied with a sharp, knowing

smile. “Yeah, that’s a common reaction. No need to keep it in your head, though, Noah—I’m *perfectly* comfortable with you saying it out loud.”

Christopher and August laughed as Noah stared at him with a faint smile and a shake of his head.

“Okay, no cap, when I manifest up a Def Comedy Jam somewhere in this realm, I promise to sign you *both* up to be on it,” Christopher said with a short laugh and a shake of his head.

“Def—*Comedy* Jam, what’s that?” August asked with a frown and a brow raised.

Noah and Christopher looked at each other with a briefly amused frown before laughing.

“Well,” Christopher said, “so—okay, it’s—”

“Look, never mind, later,” August said with a briefly amused smile, a shake of his head, and a brief close of his eyes. “Let’s get back to training.”

“Thank you,” Noah said with a slight tilt of his head with a brief, faint smile.

“Okay, now, force shield,” August said. “Christopher, you already mastered this, so Noah, this is your time now. This is the biggest one you have to master because it’s one of the abilities that protects you from any attacks Enki and his demons will throw your way.”

Taking several steps back, August sighed.

“This is something you need to use all of your intention on,” August said, “you think of the words force shield once. Your force shield will appear in whatever color your aura is. So, start now.”

Noah stared at the grass with widened eyes. *Force shield*. Within a second, Noah found himself behind a thick, transparent, blue square shield filled with streaks of electricity. Noah’s eyes widened as he stared at every corner of the shield. August smiled and nodded as Christopher clapped and smiled as well.

“Very good,” August said, “good job, Noah. You use this shield to

protect yourself from Enki and his archons when you need to. While you're behind this shield, neither Enki nor his archons can touch you, much less harm you."

"Got it," Noah nodded before the shield vanished into thin air. August's eyes widened and his brows raised.

"How did you know how to make the shield disappear?" August asked.

Noah shrugged and slightly shook his head.

"I don't know," Noah replied, "I just thought of the shield disappearing—"

"And it did," August cut in with a smirk and a slow shake of his head, "*you are learning; I'm impressed.*"

Noah yawned, which made August raise a brow and look at his watch.

"Well, it's six-thirty," August said, "so—"

Christopher frowned.

"You created *time* here too?"

"Yeah," August replied, "I told you, all the good things of Earth I brought up here."

"Well," Noah said, "is it possible we can pick this back up tomorrow morning? Because seriously, it feels like I haven't slept in—*days*, and if I close my eyes right now, I'm gone, and I'm not going to be good to anyone without any rest."

August laughed silently and nodded.

"Okay, we'll continue again tomorrow at seven a.m. sharp because we still have a few more things to cover. Come on, I'll fix dinner for all of us."

As Hazel sat on the sofa in the living room, watching television, Noah sat at August's kitchen table. Christopher walked in and walked over to

August, who was at the stove frying boxty in a pan.

“Man, that smells great; what are we having?” Christopher asked.

“Boxty with colcannon,” August said with a smile.

Christopher raised a brow and frowned.

“Boxty? Colcannon? What kind of food is that?” Christopher asked.

“They’re Irish dishes,” August replied.

“You’re Irish?” Noah asked with widened eyes.

“Well, I like to say that I have Irish heritage, and I’m deeply connected to my Irish roots. My father was born and raised in Dublin, and lived there until he was in his forties. He was strongly rooted in his Irish heritage; my mom is American. My father died when my mother was pregnant with me, but before he died, he made my mother promise to raise me up learning everything about Irish heritage. So, even though my mother and I moved from Ireland to America about a month after I was born, she immersed me from childhood in Irish culture—from the Celtic traditions, to the food, the beliefs—everything.”

“Wow, that’s really cool,” Christopher said.

“Yeah, it is,” Noah chimed in, “I hope this doesn’t sound offensive to ask or anything, but do you speak a little Irish?”

August laughed.

“I speak more than just a little. What would you like to hear? An old song, maybe?”

“No, just—say something simple,” Noah insisted with a curious smile.

August nodded with a faint smile. He closed his eyes briefly, gathering the words.

“Beidh an dinnéar réidh i gceann uair an chloig,” August said while turning the stove off, “rud a chuirfidh áthas mór ar Hazel, atá ag cur brú orm dlús a chur leis an dinnéar a réiteach.”

Christopher and Noah stared blankly.

"Whoa, okay so what did you just say?" Christopher asked with a smile and a slight shake of his head.

August laughed.

"I said that dinner will be ready in about an hour, which should make hungry Hazel, who's been pressuring me about hurrying up with fixing dinner, super happy."

Christopher immediately burst into laughter. Noah smiled, genuinely impressed.

"Man, that is seriously *impressive*, August!" Noah said with a smile. "You switch between English and Irish so smoothly."

August let out a soft, breathy laugh.

"Thanks," August responded, "I also can speak French fluently too."

Christopher laughed as Noah raised a brow at August.

"Oh, okay now you're just showing off," Noah said with a brief, faint frown and a half smile. "What, are you fluent in every language? What's next? Mandarin?"

August laughed softly before giving Noah a teasing look.

"I mean, if it makes you feel better, Noah, I could start speaking in Pig Latin for you, if that's more your speed."

Christopher laughed, clapping his hands together in appreciation of the banter. Noah rolled his eyes, though he was clearly amused.

"All right, all right," Christopher said, still smiling. "So, if you can speak French, let's hear it. Say something for us."

August frowned briefly with a brow raised before clearing his throat and looking from Noah to Christopher with a mischievous glint.

"Noah ressemble au genre de mec qui mange ses céréales avec du lait chaud, et Chris... bah, l'expression préférée de Chris, ça doit être "no cap", parce qu'il l'a dit beaucoup trop de fois aujourd'hui."

Christopher frowned faintly with a slight shake of his head.

"Okay, what did you just say?" Christopher asked.

August let out a teasing laugh.

"I said, 'Noah looks like the kind of guy who eats his cereal with warm milk, and Chris... well, Chris's favorite expression must be "no cap," because he's said it way too many times today."

Christopher burst out laughing, his deep laugh filling the room.

"Oh, no he *didn't*!" Christopher said with a smile. "Yeah, I do say that a lot though."

"Right. Got it," Noah said while nodding with a smile, "so besides being a walking dictionary who is fluent in condescension, what other skills do you have? Do you know how to—juggle flaming torches, or perhaps recite the periodic table backwards while balancing a pint glass on your nose?"

August laughed with his usual charismatic energy.

"Well, yeah I can, but I save the torch-juggling for when I need to distract people from the fact that they're being annoyingly inquisitive."

Both Christopher and August laughed, it was laughter that Noah joined in on himself, their easy friendship filling the kitchen.

"All right, all right, linguistic genius," Christopher said, "you've convinced us you're one of the smartest guys in Amagi. Now, is this Irish food going to be as perfect as your French?"

August laughed.

"It will be, yeah," August replied with a faint smile. "You both are going to love Boxy and Colcannon. In fact, it was—my wife's favorite meal."

After a few seconds, Noah saw August's eyes shimmer with tears, resulting in Noah frowning with sympathy.

"So, how did you first learn about Enki and everything related to him?" Noah inquired, trying to get August's mind off of his wife.

August took the pan off the stove, walked over to the island, and sighed before sitting on a stool, his expression reflecting deep contemplation.

“Well, you know, I always believed that my first encounter with Enki was after my wife Samantha passed away,” August said, his voice tinged with a soft sadness, “but the truth is, my first real brush with him happened when I was seven. At the time, I had no idea who he was, nor could I even comprehend the significance of our meeting.”

“What?” Christopher said with brows raised.

“That's insane,” Noah chimed in.

“Yeah, I thought so too. It was—*terrifying*. Since then, for years, I was haunted by that encounter in my dreams, once every month, without fail, and I couldn't understand why. Then, after Samantha's death, amidst my grief, I came across a YouTube video talking all about Enki, who went by names such as *The Demiurge* and *Lucifer*. That's when it clicked—the being from my childhood was Enki. For some reason unbeknown to me, he had been targeting me since I was born, intending to snatch away everyone that was in my circle and that I loved until I had no choice but to end my life and join him in *The Summerland*. Somehow though, I guess the universe had different plans for me. Anyway, he did all that because he believed, in his twisted logic, that I belonged to him and that I'm his property. He still believes that.”

“Wow,” Christopher said before shaking his head with widened eyes.

“Yeah,” August said, “As soon as I realized everything there is to know about Enki and the reincarnation trick, I immediately started getting crystals and using meditation to create protection barriers around myself and everyone I loved who was still alive. The one day my protection barrier weakened was the day I tried to astral project to *The Summerland* to get to you, Noah, and to Jack. I couldn't astral project, and so I got really angry, and the negative loosh energy from my anger broke the barrier, and Enki came in and attacked me—*badly*.”

August shook his head with a sigh and a frown.

“In his mind, he actually believes he's my father. In fact, he

believes he's the father of all mankind. The guy is just—*beyond* evil, he's demented.”

It was close to midnight when August walked down the stairs of his home in Amagi. Usually, at that time of night on Earth, he'd be asleep, but his thirst for water was blocking him from getting any rest. He walked into the dimly lit kitchen, stopped in the doorway, and frowned as he saw Hazel with her back turned to him, standing in front of the open fridge with a woven basket hanging off her left arm. He looked away and silently laughed with a shake of his head before he crept up behind her and watched as she put a container of chocolate chip cookies in her basket.

With an amused smile, he reached into the basket, grabbed the cookies, and put them on his island counter. As she placed the jug of milk in her basket, he reached into the basket again, grabbed the milk, and placed it on the counter as well. As Hazel closed the refrigerator back, she turned around and saw August standing behind her, smiling with a brow raised.

“Uh oh,” Hazel said before widening her eyes.

Dropping the basket to the floor, she raced past him and towards the kitchen entrance before August turned and grabbed her before she could leave.

“Wait, wait, hold it, you little cookie monster,” August said before laughing.

Hazel sighed, stomped her foot, and turned to face him with slumped shoulders and a frown.

“I’m sorry, August. I was just still hungry, and I wanted a plate of the clear bowl stuff on the top shelf of the fridge, but it was cold, and I realized that I’m *way* too short to reach the microwave above the sink, and I didn’t want to step my feet onto your stool because it looked too

expensive. So I settled for cookies and milk. You aren't going to tell my dad, are you? He'll get *really* upset because he said I shouldn't eat cookies because they're bad for my teeth."

Briefly looking away from her, August laughed at the adorableness of the eight-year-old.

"No, I won't," he replied, "but your dad's right; cookies *are* bad for your teeth."

"Then why do you have them yourself?" Hazel asked.

August looked down, lightly blushed, and silently laughed. Hazel smiled with a shake of her head.

"Stop sweating it, August; you don't owe me an answer."

August smiled, leaned his tongue against the inside of his cheek with a faint frown.

"Thank you," he replied before laughing. "Um—how about you have a seat on a stool at the island, and I'll fix you a plate of the clear bowl stuff?"

"Yes!" Hazel exclaimed before rushing over to a stool and climbing on it. "So, how do you know my dad?"

August sighed as he scooped lasagna onto a plate and put the plate in the microwave.

"I met him—a while ago when I first came to his home to talk to him about your grandfather."

Hazel stared at him with squinted eyes for a few seconds.

"Dad said you talked to my grandfather a few times; is that true?"

August nodded before going to the microwave, taking the plate out, and handing it to her with a fork.

"Yup, I did," he replied before sitting on a stool in front of her.

"Does he know about me?" Hazel asked, her mouth full of food.

"Does he know I'm Daddy's daughter?"

August stared at her with a frown and a raised brow. He squinted and read her IS-BE so that he could know just the right words to say.

"Yeah, he knows," August said softly with a smile. "He knows, and he loves you a lot. He said he's very proud of you, and he said he can't wait to meet you soon."

Hazel gasped with a smile and widened eyes.

"Really?" Hazel exclaimed.

August smiled more.

"Yeah," he replied, "really."

As August looked down and saw Hazel's plate empty, he briefly frowned and then laughed.

"Wow, I obviously didn't give you enough to eat at dinner because you finished your lasagna fast."

"I told you I was hungry, and it also helps that you're a great cook too," Hazel replied with a smile, resulting in him laughing again.

She sighed while staring at the plate for a few seconds before darting her eyes up to him.

"August, is my grandfather really in a terrible place called The Summerland?"

August stared down at the island counter with a frown. He wasn't sure how to answer her. Given her age, he didn't know whether to tell her the truth or not. August sighed with a brief close of his eyes.

"Yeah, he is, for now."

"Oh," she replied while staring down at the plate with slumped shoulders. "Will you promise to help Daddy bring him here?"

August stared at her, and despite her slightly lowered head, he could see her eyes glistening with tears. Reaching over, he took hold of her hand and held it.

"Sweetheart, I promise I will, okay?" August replied. "I'm going to make sure I do *everything* I can to help your father bring your grandfather *and* your mother here, all right?"

Hopping onto the table, she quickly crawled over to August and hugged him tightly, taking him aback.

"This is all going to turn out just fine, kiddo, I promise, okay?" August said while hugging her back.

As Hazel nodded, he stood up from the stool with her in his arms.

"Okay, well," August said while grabbing the empty plate and putting it in the sink, "seeing as how I've fed your appetite, I'd say it's time for you to go back to bed."

"Yeah, I think I'm ready to go back now too," Hazel said before yawning and resting her head on his shoulder.

After August dropped Hazel back off in the second guest bedroom, with his water bottle in hand, he headed to his bedroom as a long yawn escaped from him. Feeling his eyes become heavy within seconds, he knew that meant that as soon as his head hit the pillow, he'd be out like a light, and sure enough, he was right. Within seconds of laying down, August fell asleep and ventured straight into a dream about The Summerland—



The entire city of The Summerland was surrounded by thick, red smoke that had numerous demonic faces within it. As citizens of The Summerland stood on both sides of the streets, several draconians dragged two men and two women out of a warehouse building and towards four separate recycling machines in the city's courtyard. All four were yelling, crying, and fighting to get free from the draconians. Among the four was Jack. Flashes of white lightning repeatedly illuminated the dimly lit city, and thunder rumbled like an angry lion's roar.

The citizens of The Summerland gathered around the recycling machines as the draconians dragging the men and women slammed each man and woman down hard on the slabs of the machines, and instantly, the wrists and ankles of each man and woman were strapped down, followed by electrodes being put on both sides of their heads.

Lifting his arm and hand to the sky, out of nowhere, a gigantic, golden trident appeared in Enki's hand. As thick, red blood rained heavily from the sky, Enki pointed the trident at the thick, steel rings of the tables, causing a thick, electrifying flame to shoot out of the trident and into the rings.

Thick, blue, and white electricity instantly jolted up and down the rings. Numerous clots of piercing, throbbing, pulsating pain exploded inside the bodies of the men and women, resulting in one of the men and both of the women screaming and crying out hysterically at the top of their lungs. The pulsating pain made each of them feel as if someone were ripping their skin and flesh off with their bare hands. Jack, in particular, felt his throat burning like fire while tightening to where breathing felt almost impossible.

As Enki dropped his head back and let out a loud, thunderous, disembodied laugh, his archons and draconians did as well, their laughter sounding like a million, echoing, demonic, howling voices all wrapped into one. As Jack finally did cry out at the top of his lungs, his body, along with the bodies of the other man and the two women, became engulfed in thick, white balls of electricity and fire; every blood vessel and organ in their bodies exploded out as if their bodies were filled with numerous bombs. Jack, the other man and the two women's crying and yelling, and Enki, his archons, and his draconians loud laughter became deafening until—



"No! No! No!" August shouted while thrashing around during his sleep in his bedroom.

With a boisterous yell, August shot up in bed, out of breath, with widened, tearful eyes and a slightly reddened face, resulting in Christopher and Noah bursting open the door to August's room and

rushing in.

“August, what is *up*?” Christopher said before rubbing his eyes and yawning, “Seriously, I thought you said only high vibrational thoughts here in this realm. Yet, you’re in here yelling like someone’s *murdering* you or something.”

While still trying to catch his breath, August closed his eyes as tears streamed. His face displayed a frown. His insides felt as if they were on fire, yet his arms and legs felt icy cold and numb. He felt his heart throbbing in his chest. His forehead, chest, and shoulders were heavily glistened with perspiration.

“We—we have to train for *everything* we need to train for *immediately*,” August said in a low tone. “Starting at the break of dawn—*all* day—and then later tonight, we *have* to go to The Summerland.”

“That quick? Why?” Noah asked as he sat on the end of August’s bed.

August exhaled slowly, lowered his head with a frown, and briefly bit down on his lower lip.

“Jack’s up for reincarnation,” August replied in a low voice. “I—I saw it *happening*, although—I don’t think it’s happened yet. Somehow—a voice inside is telling me that it *hasn’t* happened yet, but it’s *going* to—and soon. I saw it happening soon, and it—it was *terrifying*.”

“No!” Noah shouted while jumping off the bed and taking a few steps back. “No, not *him*—no!”

“Damn,” Christopher said while displaying a frown and dropping down on the bed. “This really is getting *serious*. We can’t let this happen, August.”

“We *aren’t*,” August said with a shake of his head.

As Noah paced back and forth, his heart skipped beats. He felt his chest heating up so intensely that he broke into a sweat on his forehead. Noah repeatedly swallowed down the bile he felt making its

way up into his throat. The thought of never seeing his father again made Noah queasy.

“No, no,” Noah said in a low, tearful voice before stopping mid-pace. “I *can’t* lose him, not again, not for a second time. I *can’t* lose my father again—”

August got up, stepped in front of Noah, and grabbed him by the arms.

“Noah, you *won’t*,” August said firmly. “I promise you—you won’t. But the only chance you have—the only chance *any* of us have—to help Jack is to train all day so that by nightfall we’re *ready*.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Seated at the kitchen table in his apartment, Jack found himself lost in a sea of thoughts; his gaze fixed intently on the coffee in his cup, his brow furrowed in concern. The unsettling notion of who might next succumb to a horrifying fate of electrocution and reincarnation occupied his mind. With a tight grip on his coffee cup, he closed his eyes, the heat from the ceramic searing into his fingertips. *August, where the hell are you? Why haven't you come back here at least once?*

His train of thought was abruptly derailed by a knock at the door, startling him. Such a noise wouldn't have stirred much within him in ordinary circumstances, but these were no ordinary times. Every sound seemed amplified; every knock was a harbinger of news he wasn't sure he was ready to face. With a mix of reluctance and curiosity, he rose and made his way to the door; his expression was one of puzzled concern as he lay eyes on his boss, Annie Stayton, standing in the doorway. Before he could utter a greeting, Annie stepped forward, enveloping him in a desperate hugging embrace that carried a torrent of unspoken emotions. Without needing any explanation, Jack returned the embrace, understanding the sorrow that had brought her to his doorstep.

"I'm so sorry, Annie," Jack said in a voice barely above a whisper.

Annie pulled away, shaking her head while wiping away her tears.

"I'm sorry too," she replied, her voice thick with emotion. "I *pleaded* with him to pick someone else, but he's just so *heartless!* I even offered to take my place instead of you, but he wouldn't listen—"

She stopped as Jack stepped back, his eyes wide with shock.

"What—*what* did you just say?" he asked, his voice low.

Annie blinked back tears, shaking her head slightly, a frown creasing her brow.

"I said I asked him to take me instead of you—"

"Aww, *goddamn* it!" Jack shouted, slamming his hands against the wall in frustration.

"Jack, I'm sorry," Annie said tearfully, her eyes brimming with tears.

Jack shook his head, closing his eyes momentarily as a frown deepened on his face.

"I knew this would happen," he said, leaning against the wall with his head bowed. "Just leave."

"Jack," Annie began, "I—"

"I said get *out*!" he yelled, rushing towards her and pushing her towards the door. "Go! Just go!"

Before she could utter another word, Jack flung open the door and shoved her outside, slamming it shut behind her. He began to pace the room; his heart was racing, and his hands were trembling. He stopped and took a moment to close his eyes while sighing. His shoulders sagged under the weight of regret. He knew he shouldn't have treated Annie that way, but the anger had consumed him, and on top of that anger was *fear*. His hands were cold and tingling despite feeling like he was on fire.

A wave of pressure gripped his stomach, and as nausea surged, he dashed to the bathroom, collapsing by the toilet to vomit. After lifting his head, the room spun around him. He closed his eyes, cradling his head in his hands as a relentless ache throbbed at his temples, feeling as if someone were mercilessly striking the top of his head with an axe. The ache spread, amplifying the pressure across his forehead as if something was yanking the nerves behind his eyes out. He opened his eyes, stood up, leaned over the sink, bowed his head, and shut his eyes again.

“August,” Jack said, his voice barely above a whisper yet heavy with emotion, “if you’re out there and you can hear this, you and Noah need to speed up the pace with the training. I—I don’t know how much time I have left, but please, you have to hurry.”

As Jack exhaled, he felt his heart pounding against his ribcage. Tears streamed from his eyes, unchecked and unashamed, as he clung to the fragile hope that August and Noah would heed his call, that they would come before it was too late.

“Our goal is to defeat an enemy,” August said as he circled Noah and Christopher while in the backyard of his Amagi home, “and we can defeat him. All it takes is will and determination. We have to use hand-to-hand combat along with our abilities because Enki’s archons will be shapeshifting in numerous forms, and we have to be ready for all of them.”

August stepped in front of Noah and nodded once with a brow raised.

“I want you to show me how good your fighting skills are.”

Noah frowned with a slight tilt of his head.

“Wait, you mean like you want me to actually—fight you? Like I would fight someone down on Earth?”

“Yeah,” August replied, “this is a part of the training. So let’s go.”

Noah looked over at Christopher with a brief smile, and Christopher slightly laughed, shrugging and shaking his head.

“Look,” Noah said, “I don’t know if—”

Noah stopped as August walked closer to Noah and punched him across his jaw, making Noah stumble back a few steps.

“Goddamn,” Christopher said with briefly widened eyes.

“Now,” August said with a faint smile, “are you going to fight

back, or should I hit you again?"

Noah stared at him with flared nostrils and a deep frown while holding his jaw. As August rushed closer to Noah again to deliver another blow to the face, Noah grabbed August's fist and arm. However, August used his left fist and delivered a blow to Noah's jaw. Grabbing Noah's arm, August quickly spun him around and pushed him hard into a table behind him. Noah spun around and tried to throw a punch, but August blocked it by punching Noah's fist away. August then punched Noah again across the jaw before grabbing Noah by the throat with one hand and slamming him down on his back on top of the table. As August kept his hand around Noah's throat, Noah punched and hit August's hands to get them from around his throat, but it was of no use. August was stronger than Noah.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Christopher shouted as he rushed over to them. "Hold up, August! What the hell? Let him go!"

"Christopher, this is just a part of the training," August said while still keeping his eyes on Noah. "Noah, you're good, but you could've easily won the fight before I threw the second punch."

"How?" Noah responded in a sharp, cold tone.

Releasing his hand from around Noah's throat, Noah got up from off the table, coughing a little while shaking his head with a brief frown.

"I'll show you," August said, "just watch."

August turned away from Noah and Christopher and stared a few feet away at his backyard. Out of thin air, Sakla instantly appeared and stood a few feet away from August, staring at him with a blank face as if waiting for a command from August.

"Whoa, where did he come from?" Christopher asked.

"I thought him up here," August said while staring at Sakla. "His name is Sakla or the name we all know him as—Enki."

"Oh no," Christopher said, stepping back from August and Sakla. Noah gaped with briefly widened eyes.

“Why the hell would you *bring* him here?” Noah asked with a shake of his head and a frown.

“Relax,” August said. “It’s only a copy I created of him; he’s not the real Enki. Now, watch and observe.”

August stared at Sakla with squinted eyes and a frown before nodding. Sakla nodded back before rushing over and raising his hand to punch August. Like a pro, August ducked right in time, and when he popped back up, he raised his right fist, which was engulfed in a thick, electricity-stained flame of fire, and jabbed his fist directly inside Sakla’s stomach. While letting out a loud, disembodied scream, Sakla stumbled several feet back before his entire body became engulfed in flames and disintegrated into ashes on the ground. Christopher laughed.

“Wow!” Christopher said with a smile. “That was amazing!”

Noah shook his head with a frown and a smile of his own.

“Yeah—yeah, how the hell did you do that?” Noah asked.

“It’s called a fire fist,” August said while walking back over to them. “You use it on your opponent, and it’ll engulf them in flames and burn them to ashes. It’s one of the most powerful abilities we have. You can use the ability by thinking of the phrase, fire fist, just once.”

“Okay, I’d like to try that,” Christopher said with a smile.

“You’re both going to try it,” August replied before looking forward with a serious expression.

Instantly, another copy of Sakla appeared a few feet from August, staring ahead and waiting for orders from August.

“While you’re fighting, don’t just remember to think of the phrase, fire fist; think of other fighting phrases too, like fire snake, eviscerate, defense shield, ice blast, and also laser weapon, which is a long, fiery, electric sword that you can use while fighting with Enki and his army—”

“Wait, you mean kinda like in the film *Star Wars*?” Christopher cut in with widened eyes and a smile. “Like a lightsaber?”

“Yeah, kinda like that,” August said after silently laughing, “only better.”

Noah sighed with a brief close of his eyes and a frown.

“I don’t know how we’re going to get this all down by tonight,” Noah said in a low, dejected tone.

August displayed a frown before patting Noah’s shoulder.

“We will, Noah, have faith in yourself, all right? Okay, you’re up first, and then Christopher, you’ll be next. Noah, when you’re ready, step in front of Sakla, give a nod, and then go for it.”

With a sigh, Noah stepped in front of Sakla and swallowed hard before nodding. In less than a second, Sakla raced over to him and rammed him head first in his stomach, trying to take him to the ground, but Noah kned him hard in the groin and pushed him hard away from him. *Laser weapon*. Instantly, Noah’s right hand held a long sword engulfed in fire with red electricity streaks. As Sakla darted back over to him, Noah raised the sword and sliced it down hard on Sakla’s right arm, resulting in Sakla yelling out in pain as his arm fell off to the ground. As Sakla’s arm instantly appeared back on his body, he darted over to Noah. While staring directly at Sakla, Noah displayed a deep frown.

Ice blast. Immediately, the sword disappeared, and numerous, thick, sharp ice crystals shot out of the palms of his hands and directly into Sakla’s chest, resulting in Sakla widening his eyes as his entire body became encased in ice before exploding into a large gush of blood that vanished into thin air. Christopher rushed over to Noah and hugged him.

“You *did* it,” Christopher said with a smile. “I can’t believe it. It was like watching X-Men and Star Wars at the same time.”

Noah and August laughed.

“I know,” Noah responded, “I can’t believe it either; I mean, what I did—it almost feels unreal.”

“It does, but it’s not. All of this is *very* real,” August said with a smile, “and come tonight, it’ll be even more real when you’re in front of

the *real* Enki, head on. Christopher, it's your turn."

"All right," Christopher said with a smile.

August gazed a few inches away from Christopher, and out of nowhere, Sakla appeared.

"Okay," August said, "begin when you're ready."

Christopher nodded at Sakla, and immediately, Sakla bolted over and punched Christopher in the face, stumbling Christopher back a bit. Before Christopher could fight back, Sakla grabbed his arm and delivered another blow to the side of Christopher's face, spinning Christopher around on his toes. With Christopher's back to Sakla, Sakla jumped on Christopher's back, wrapped his arms around Christopher, and put him in a tight chokehold. With a loud yell, Christopher flipped Sakla over his shoulder and onto the ground on his back. Stomping his foot down onto Sakla's chest, Christopher stared at him with a clenched jaw and a deep frown. *Eyeshock*.

Instantly, thick, orange beams of light blasted out of Christopher's eyes and directly into Sakla's chest, resulting in Sakla yelling out at the top of his lungs. As August smiled and nodded, Christopher yanked his foot up off Sakla. *Fire snake*. Instantly, Christopher's arm transformed into a long cobra snake with sharp spikes on its back, engulfed in yellow, streaked fire. As Noah gaped with widened eyes and raised brows, Christopher thrust his arm deep down into Sakla's chest, engulfing Sakla in a large ball of fire. As Sakla burned into a pile of ashes that got sucked into the ground, Christopher's arm shapeshifted back to normal again.

"Well done!" August exclaimed while clapping and walking over to Christopher. "That was amazing, Christopher!"

Noah laughed and shook his head while August frowned at him, tilted his head slightly, and briefly smiled.

"What?" August asked Noah.

"Nothing," Noah replied, "it's just that I finally realized

something.”

“What’s that?” August asked.

“That we really *are* going to defeat Enki and his archons,” Noah said with a smile. “I didn’t believe it at first, but I do now.”

August expressed a short, breathed laugh while nodding.

“Yeah, I believe it too,” Christopher exclaimed with a smile.

“Good,” August said, “I’m glad you both *do* believe it because we *are*.”

The Summerland

As Jack sat on the sofa in his living room, his mind replayed every moment of his life on Earth, from the time he married Joanna to the day he held Noah in his arms for the first time ever, to the many times he played with Noah in the backyard of their home, up to the day he died and left Noah alone. He knew that upon him reincarnating, all of those memories would be gone from him forever, and as he thought on the fact that he’d never see his son ever again, he leaned forward, rested his head on the wrists of his clasped together hands, and broke into light sobs. He knew August and Noah wouldn’t save him in time because how could they? They didn’t even have any idea that he was even up for reincarnation.

He shut his eyes and clutched his stomach as the thought of the unbearable agony awaiting him on the reincarnation machine slab made his stomach twist in knots. He envisioned the pain would surpass the torment he experienced when he was attacked by dogs in The Summerland, even more intense than the lashes he endured at the hands of one of Enki’s servants. Opening his eyes, as tears streamed, a mild, throbbing ache generated throughout his chest. His hands were trembling, and all the color drained from Jack’s face. To say he was scared of what he was about to endure was an understatement. *I could*

just teleport away. I could use the teleportation ability and leave here and now.

Jack shook his head, trying his best to shake the idea from his mind because he knew it was futile. There was no way he could teleport away in a fast enough time before Enki's servants appeared and stopped him from leaving. Besides, despite knowing about that ability, he had no idea how to even conjure it up. No, he was trapped, and he knew it. Sitting perfectly still, Jack practiced dissociative identity disorder by clenching his hands into fists, closing his eyes, and forcing his mind and emotions to disconnect from his body.

At that moment, no matter how much he wanted to break down again, he forced himself as hard as he could not to. *Disassociate, disassociate, disassociate.* Immediately, a mental vision of him sitting in a chair with his eyes closed in a black room popped up in his mind, and it remained there. The room was so quiet that Jack could hear his own beating heart, and despite his body still remaining in his apartment, his mind and emotions were locked in that dark, quiet room.

"So, what's the first thing you're going to do after this war is all over?" Christopher asked August as August washed the dishes in his kitchen.

August stopped washing dishes and expressed a breathed laugh.

"Hold the biggest celebration party ever on the beach with all the good people we helped escape from The Summerland and Klipoth."

Christopher smiled with a nod.

"I look forward to being reunited with my grandparents," Christopher said in a low tone.

"They're in The Summerland too?" August asked.

Christopher sighed with a frown while staring down at the

island's counter where he was sitting.

"Yeah, I just don't know where," Christopher replied. "They were the only real parents I had, and it broke me when they died. For so many years, I didn't even know how to function on my own. They died believing in God, so I know they're in The Summerland somewhere."

August turned around to face him.

"Keep their memory with you during our battle tonight; it'll be the additional ammo you'll need to help you win."

Christopher looked up at August with a brow raised.

"Yeah, you and Noah will win this battle. Me? I don't think so."

August frowned with a brow raised.

"I do," August said. "Christopher, the power isn't within just Noah and me; it's within you, too. *You* have the ability to do the impossible, too."

"Really?" Christopher asked with a frown. "You really think so?"

"Christopher, If I didn't think so, I wouldn't even *think* of having you come with us tonight. The ability to be godlike, powerful, and great isn't just within *some* of us; it's within *all* of us, *every* single person who's alive and who has *ever* lived. We just have to *realize* it and *manifest* it into reality."

Getting up, Christopher walked over to August and extended his hand to him. August shook it and gave him a hug, which Christopher embraced.

"Thanks, man," Christopher said. "You know you *really* know how to uplift people. Are you sure that, along with being a professor and author, you weren't also a motivational speaker while you were on Earth or something like that?"

August laughed.

"No, I just watched a lot of episodes of Xena Warrior Princess, specifically seasons one through three," August said before sharing a laugh with Christopher.

“Wow, okay,” Christopher said. “See, I thought you’d be more of a—Hercules fan or something like that.”

“Hercules as in the TV show?” August asked. “Nah, I can’t stand Kevin Sorbo.”

Christopher laughed.

“Watching him act on any TV show or in any movie should be the punishment they give to stone-cold murderers on death row,” August said as Christopher burst into laughter.

“Okay,” Noah said as he walked into the kitchen, “I just dropped Hazel off at the school down the street. By the way, are you going to be keeping that school around all the time here in Amagi?”

“Yeah,” August replied with a nod, “there are a few kids around here in Amagi, so I created the school for them. However, if they don’t want to go, they don’t have to. Just like if people don’t want to work, they don’t have to because everything here is free—homes, cars, clothes, food, you name it. Unlike The Summerland, there’s no pressure on anyone here because in Amagi, it’s all about freedom.”

“We don’t have to work,” Noah said with a nod, “nice because I *really* got tired of being a childcare teacher.”

August, Christopher, and Noah laughed.

“Okay, so,” August said with a clap of his hands, “are we ready to go to The Summerland?”

“Yeah,” Christopher said with a nod.

Noah hesitantly nodded.

“Yeah—uh, yeah, I’m ready,” Noah said, looking away from August.

August frowned with a brow raised as he stepped in front of Noah.

“Noah, tonight is the night you were destined to take on since birth. Go to The Summerland and *own* your destiny; take back your family and your freedom and *own* it. Do it because you *know* you *can*, all right?”

With a brief close of his eyes, Noah exhaled and nodded.

“You’re right, I can.”

“Okay,” August said with a raised brow, “let’s go to The Summerland and defeat Enki.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was close to seven-thirty in the afternoon as Jack slept on the sofa. It took hours for him to fall asleep, but through his dissociation, he finally got what he felt would be the last rest he'd get in a long time, if ever, before being put into the endless reincarnation loop. He was jolted awake, however, by two of Enki's draconian soldiers breaking down his door and rushing into his living room.

"Get up, Jack!" one of the draconian soldiers yelled while grabbing Jack's arm. "It's time for you to leave the nest!"

As the draconian soldier yanked Jack up to his feet, Jack didn't fight back. After all, what would've been the point? The other draconian soldier slammed thick, silver chain cuffs down onto Jack's wrists so hard that Jack felt his wrists stinging with a burning pain that made him frown and clench his jaw.

"Let's go!" one of the draconian soldiers shouted while roughly pulling Jack to the apartment door by his chain cuffs. "We can't keep Enki waiting!"

Walking down the steps of his brownstone apartment building, Jack swallowed hard as he saw the thick, red smoke permeate the city, letting him know that an ethereal IS-BE reincarnation was about to occur. He was sure that down on Earth, the red smoke made the entire Summerland moon realm look as red as blood. As he walked away from his Brownstone apartment building, Jack stared back at it one final time with a lump climbing into his throat.

As he walked down the street of The Summerland, passing all the residents standing on both sides of him, he couldn't even look them in

the eyes. His face turned red as he felt a wave of shame wash over him. As Jack came within feet of the recycling machine where Enki and his other draconian, reptilian, and archon servants were standing nearby, he came to an abrupt halt. His heart stopped immediately, and his legs instantly felt numb, weak, and tingly, as if they were asleep and paralyzed. His forehead broke into a glistening sweat. His eyes clouded with tears, as at that time, the machine looked more towering and larger than he had ever seen it before.

“Come on, Jack, it’s time to go!” one of the draconian soldiers said while pushing Jack hard towards the machine, making him almost fall to the ground.

Jack closed his eyes and frowned as tears streamed before walking over to the machine, climbing onto the slab, and lying down on it. As all The Summerland residents gathered around the machine, Enki joked and laughed with some of the draconian, reptilian, and archon servants next to him. As Jack felt each electrode get slammed down onto his forehead by one of the draconian soldiers, he clenched his fists and frowned deeply while biting down on his lower lip. The tight shackles around Jack’s wrists and ankles sent a burning pain through his lower back as if an electric prod was burning into the base of his spine, setting all his nerves on fire. As the draconian soldiers walked away, his tearful eyes looked up at the dark sky that was spinning quickly.

Shutting his eyes as tears streamed, he began to mildly hyperventilate because he knew what was coming. Despite him doing dissociation exercises to separate his mind from his ethereal body, it wasn’t working at that moment. His heart was thumping so hard, his chest throbbed with pain. Tears once again filled Jack’s eyes as he opened them; he was so frightened about what was going to happen to him, he began lightly trembling. As the recycling machine turned on, it was loud and sounded like a million rocket launchers all going off at the same time, repeatedly. He could feel the vibration of the machine under

him.

“Stop!” Noah shouted as he ran through the crowd of Summerland residents and over to Enki and his reptilian, draconian, and archon servants, with August and Christopher right behind him. “Let him go, Enki!”

Jack turned, looked over at Noah, and widened his eyes. Enki stared at Noah with widened eyes that turned from glowing white to glowing red.

“You!” Enki shouted in a loud, disembodied voice. “What are you fucking doing back here? Are you back here to watch your father get *obliterated* into a billion volts?”

As Enki and his reptilian, draconian, and archon servants laughed loudly, Noah half-smiled and looked away briefly, shaking his head.

“No,” Noah said with a brow raised, “I’m here; all *three* of us are here to *end* you.”

Enki displayed a wide, sinister smile before backing up a few feet from Noah.

“Well, this should be good,” Enki said before laughing, “*bring* it, IS-BES! Iao, Eloaios, Eloiein, take care of all three of them!”

Stepping out from behind Enki was Iao, a five feet four feet tall, scaly, muscular built draconian with glowing green eyes and long, brown horns coming out of each side of its head. Sharp, thin blades covered the horns. Its mouth was wide open, exposing its long, dirty, dark brown teeth shaped like knives. Beside Iao stepped Eloiein, a six-foot-tall, Herculean-built draconian with a man's body and a lion's head. His eyes glowed yellow and bulged.

Its mouth was open, and its teeth were white, long, and shaped like fangs, with thick, slimy blood oozing down. Both wet and dry blood were stained all over its body and hands. Elaios, a six-foot-tall draconian with scaly skin, glowing green, slit-pupil eyes, and a body encased in hard tin metal, stepped up beside Eloiein. As Elaios opened his mouth, his

long, black, sparkling, forked tongue shot out and quickly retracted back before he closed it.

After all three draconians let out a loud, thunderous, disembodied roar, they bolted over to Noah, Christopher, and August while extending their arms and hands. Thick, blue beams of light shot out of the palms of the draconians' hands. As residents of The Summerland started yelling and scattering away, with quick speed, August, Noah, and Christopher ducked, missing being hit by the beams of light. As the three draconians ran up to August, Noah, and Christopher, they each began exchanging punches and kicks with them. Loud, roaring thunder and wind, mixed in with loud, disembodied, occultic chanting from what sounded like a billion draconians, archons, and reptilians all unified into one, swept through the city of The Summerland.

Iao delivered a hard punch in Noah's direction, but Noah ducked down and then popped back up and delivered an uppercut to Iao's chin, causing blood from Iao's mouth to splatter as his body flew several feet back onto the ground. Before Iao could get up, Noah raced over to him. *Fire fist.* Jumping on top of Iao, Noah slammed his fist, which was now glowing blue electricity-streaked fire, down onto Iao's face repeatedly, resulting in his face bursting into flames.

Right then, another tall, black, scaly draconian with glowing orange, slit pupil eyes charged over and jumped onto Noah's back. With a loud yell, Noah jumped up and body-slammed the draconian over his shoulder and onto the ground, almost breaking the ground. Noah stomped his foot onto the draconian's chest while holding his arm. Noah spun around and twisted the draconian's arm backward before ripping it off the draconian's body, sending blood spurting everywhere.

As the draconian vanished into thin air, Noah heard Iao yelling at the top of his lungs in a disembodied, vibrating tone. Spinning around, Noah saw Iao bolting towards him. *Eyeshock. Fireball.* Quickly extending

his arm and hand out, a thick, red beam of light shot out of the palm of Noah's hand while thick, red beams of light shot out of Noah's eyes. All the beams blasted into Iao's chest, sending him flying backward before bursting into an explosive ball of flames.

As Eloiein marched towards Christopher, his arm became a long, razor-sharp machete. Christopher laughed before shaking his head.

"Oh, you're going *down*, iron head," Christopher said with his brows clenched.

Eloiein raised his machete hand to slice it down on Christopher, but Christopher grabbed hold of Eloiein's hand just in time. *Fireball*. Christopher shot the open palm of his left hand towards Eloiein's stomach, sending a blast of fire into him. Eloiein yelled as he was thrown back several feet. However, Eloiein rushed back over to Christopher and punched Christopher in the face, causing Christopher to stumble back. Jumping up in the air towards Christopher, Eloiein grabbed him by the throat, slammed him down to the ground, and slashed his shoulder with his machete, resulting in Christopher yelling out.

With an angry yell, Christopher punched Eloiein in the throat and then kicked Eloiein off him. Shooting up to his feet, Eloiein extended his hand to punch Christopher, but Christopher bolted up off the ground, shot away from him, and floated in midair. Dropping his feet back down to the ground, Christopher held out his hand, and a crystal clear beam blasted out of his palm and into Eloiein's chest, resulting in Eloiein howling at the top of his lungs. As the beam vanished into thin air, Eloiein galloped over to Christopher and raised his machete at him. With quick speed, Christopher shot his eyes over to the machete. *Ice blast*. Instantly, the machete turned to ice before shattering into pieces, returning Eloiein's arm to normal. Eloiein shot a look over at Christopher with bulging eyes.

"You *motherfucker*!" Eloiein shouted.

As Eloiein ran over to Christopher, Christopher grabbed him by the neck and tossed him high in the air. *Eviscerate*. Instantly, minus Eloiein's head, the rest of his body exploded, sending blood and organs splattering everywhere.

"Now that's what I call a flawless victory," Christopher said with a smile before tossing Eloiein's head behind him and walking away.

Eloaios turned around to face August, and August delivered a hard kick to his face with his foot, knocking Eloaios back several feet. With quick speed, August delivered a hard blow to Eloaios' jaw, causing Eloaios to slam back against a brick wall behind him. With speed, Eloaios delivered a hard blow to the side of August's stomach. As August stumbled back a bit, Eloaios grabbed August around the throat, but August took his fist and punched Eloaios's hand down from his throat. After kneeing him in the groin, August spun Eloaios around twice and slammed him into the brick wall behind them both, causing thick amounts of blood to gush out from Eloaios' mouth and nose. Before Eloaios could move away from the brick wall, August kicked him in the chest, resulting in him yelling out. At a rapid speed, Eloaios extended his arms and hands towards August, and a thick, bubbly blast of red bubbles shot out of his palms.

August squinted and frowned while staring at Eloaios. *Force shield*. Instantly, a thick, red, sparkly shield popped out of thin air in front of August, blocking the bubbly blast from getting to him. *Vanish*. Instantly, the shield in front of August and the bubbly blast exploded and vanished into sparkly, red dust. Rushing over to August, Eloaios punched August hard in the face, once on the left side of the jaw and the second time on the right side, causing August to stumble back a bit as blood splattered out of his mouth. When Eloaios rushed his hand up to deliver another blow, August rushed his arm up to block it. August delivered a

blow of his own to Eloaios' face before punching Eloaios hard in the stomach, sending him flying back several feet to the ground. As Eloaios coughed repeatedly and struggled to get up, immediately, a long, fiery staff manifested into August's hand.

As Eloaios got to his feet, August walked over to him while spinning the staff around quickly like a martial arts pro. Before Eloaios could strike first, August jabbed the staff directly into Eloaios' face, setting his face on fire. As Eloaios yelled out at the top of his lungs, August yanked the staff out of Eloaios' face and stabbed it deep in his chest before lifting Eloaios' body in the air and slamming his body to the ground. Before Eloaios could get to his feet, August's staff evaporated into thin air. Rushing closer to Eloaios, August jumped on top of him and strangled him. However, Eloaios tackled August onto his back and delivered several blows to August's face. With his leg, August kicked Eloaios off of him and flipped Eloaios onto his back on the ground behind him.

Before Eloaios could get to his feet, August jumped to his feet first, jumped on top of Eloaios, and jammed his fist deep down into Eloaios' chest, causing blood to splatter everywhere. *Shapeshift.* Shapeshifting into a large tiger, August raised his paw, which had numerous, long, razor-sharp claws on it, and slashed into Eloaios' face and chest. As thick amounts of Eloaios' blood gushed out everywhere, Eloaios burst into thick flames. With speed, August slammed his paws onto Eloaios's chest, charring Eloaios's body into ashes before the ashes vanished into thin air.

Noah rushed over to his father, who was strapped to the slab of the recycling machine.

"Dad, it's going to be okay now," Noah said as he pressed his hand, which had blue electricity streaks running through it onto the

metal chains around Jack's wrists and ankles, breaking the chains immediately.

As soon as Jack's chains broke, he jumped off the slab and hugged Noah.

"I didn't think you'd make it here in time to save me," Jack said. "I can't *believe* how you fought with all those—*abilities* over there—*how?*"

Noah smiled as he patted Jack's shoulder.

"It was the training, Dad. I learned how to use them during the training. They're abilities that we all have."

"Hey!" August shouted as he ran over to Noah and Jack, with Christopher following, "I hate to break up the family reunion, but look behind me. Enki and his army are trying to round up every resident here and take them down to Klipoth, the fight isn't over."

As Noah looked behind him, he saw thousands of draconians, archons, and reptilians grabbing thousands of hysterically screaming and crying residents of The Summerland and dragging them over to a huge, open, electricity-streaked net that was the size of Earth.

"Damn it," Noah said in a low voice with a frown.

"Let's go, Noah," Christopher said while staring at the residents of The Summerland, "let's help these people and finish this."

"Okay, Dad," Noah said while shooting a look over at Jack, "you stay here; if anyone comes to attack you, just think of the words fire snake, eviscerate, defense shield, fire fist, eye shock, ice blast—and also laser fire sword. Those are all ability weapons you can use to fight back, all right?"

"Eviscerate, defense shield, eye shock—okay, yeah, I got it," Jack said with a nod.

"Noah, let's go, come on!" August shouted while rushing away.

Noah gave his father one last reassuring stare and nod before rushing over to where August and Christopher were walking. Approaching where The Summerland residents were, August's eyes

instantly glowed bright red, and his face displayed a frown of determined rage as he saw the net now closed and filled with all The Summerland residents who were screaming and crying at the top of their lungs due to being zapped repeatedly from the electricity that bolted from the net. Red light beams zapped out of August's eyes and blasted straight into the net. As Christopher and Noah held out their hands, thick yellow, electricity-streaked beams of light shot out of their palms and towards the net as well, eviscerating the net into ashes and freeing the residents.

"IS-BEs of The Summerland!" August shouted. "Use your powers and fight *back*! Now is the time! You have *nothing* to fear now! Think of the words fire snake, eviscerate, defense shield, ice blast, laser fire sword, fire fist, fireball, eye shock, and think of them with intention and fight *back*!"

"No!" Enki shouted at the top of his lungs in a deep, thunderous, disembodied voice as he marched hurriedly up to where The Summerland residents, his draconians, archons, and reptilians were, the ground rumbling with each heavy step that he took. "These fucking IS-BEs are *my property*! You will *not take* my goddamn *property*!"

Instantly, the archons, reptilians, and draconians charged towards August, Christopher, and Noah. One by one, August, Christopher, Noah, and the residents of The Summerland fought off archon after archon, reptilian after reptilian, and draconian after draconian. Some used the fire snake ability, some used the ice blast, some used the laser fire sword, and others used the fireball ability. Looking to his left, Jack saw a tall, male draconian bolting towards him. Jack stood to his feet as his eyes widened a little.

"Oh shit," Jack said before swallowing hard.

With a loud, disembodied yell, the draconian raised a long, fiery, orange sword, which he slammed down towards Jack upon approaching him. However, Jack lifted his hand right in time and caught the sword in

his hands. Jack yelled out a little as blood gushed out from his hand and onto the ground. With speed, Jack kicked the draconian hard in the stomach, sending the draconian flying several feet back from him. As Jack turned to his right, he gasped as he saw the draconian standing right in front of him. Before Jack could do anything, the draconian threw a strong, hard left hook across his face, knocking Jack to his knees. Jack shut his eyes tight, and as his face reddened, he knew that with August, Noah, and Christopher there, there was nothing left to fear anymore. Nothing nor anyone was preventing him at that moment from using every one of the abilities he could manifest from within him in a fight. Jack got to his feet just as the draconian charged towards him. The draconian shot up his arm and fist to punch Jack, but Jack blocked it and punched the draconian in the stomach before delivering a hard blow to his chest twice.

As the draconian stumbled back a bit, Jack kicked the draconian hard in the stomach again, stumbling the draconian back a little more. As the draconian sprinted back over to him and lifted his leg to kick Jack, Jack grabbed the draconian's leg. One of the words Noah told him to use immediately popped into his mind. *Fire fist*. As Jack's entire left arm engulfed in white, electricity-streaked fire, he punched his elbow down hard onto the draconian's leg, almost shattering it in half. As the draconian let out a loud, disembodied wail, Jack shoved the draconian away from him, resulting in the draconian stumbling back a bit. As the draconian's leg instantly healed, the draconian bolted back over to Jack, and an entirely new word popped into Jack's head, one that Noah hadn't told him about. *Ice club*. Out of thin air, Jack's hand suddenly gripped a long, sharp medieval mace club encased in electricity-streaked ice; its spikes were sharp and menacing.

Jack stared at the club for a second with widened eyes before charging over to the draconian and bashing the club hard on the side of the draconian's head, resulting in the draconian's blood splattering out

all over Jack and the streets. As the draconian stumbled back several feet, Jack bashed the mace club in the draconian's face repeatedly. Grabbing the draconian by the neck quickly, Jack lifted him halfway off the ground before kicking him hard in the chest, sending him flying up into the air. Before the draconian's body could slam back down, Jack glared at him. *Fireball*. Thick gushes of red, electrifying fire shot out of Jack's eyes, and like lightning bolts, it shot into the middle of the draconian's chest and out of his back. The fire then reversed, shaped itself into a long knife, and slashed the draconian's neck, decapitating the draconian's head off its shoulders. As blood gushed from the head, it dropped down onto the ground.

The streets of the Summerland became covered with blood after August, Christopher, Noah, and the residents of The Summerland slaughtered almost every reptilian, archon, and draconian in sight. As Enki stared at his now under fifty army of reptilians, draconians, and archons that were still left, his face transformed into one that was longer and slender with a wide, slit open mouth that revealed long, sharp teeth that had rotten blood and flesh oozing off it.

Several thick, long, scaly black horns popped out of his head. His glowing red eyes grew large, almost taking up half of the space on his face. A huge red hole in the middle of his forehead glowed red with flames burning inside it. Thick, white electricity streaked through his bare chest, arms, and legs. With a deep, loud, thunderous roar, Enki marched over towards August, Christopher, and Noah and stopped just inches from them.

"Today, you all will burn *forever* in Klipoth!" Enki shouted. "No one fucking defeats *me*! No one!"

With a clenched jaw and furrowed brows, August stepped forward, ready to attack Enki, but Noah grabbed his arm.

"No, August, let me," Noah said while staring at Enki with a brow raised. "I've been waiting for this for a long time."

Stepping forward towards Enki, Noah stared at Enki with intense eye contact; his eyes widened briefly.

"Let's go, you sick, demented son of a bitch," Noah said with a brow raised and flared nostrils.

Stepping back a little, Enki slowly smiled before breaking into evil, disembodied laughter. As Enki's brows clenched, his red eyes grew even larger before he ran over towards Noah, and in turn, Noah ran over to him. As they both jumped up in the air, Enki grabbed him and spun him around three times before slamming his body down hard on the ground. Before Noah could get up, Enki jumped on top of Noah, raised his massive, Herculean arm, and balled his hand into a fist that instantly blazed red, electricity-streaked fire that had numerous roaring, demonic faces in the middle of it and slammed the fist down into the middle of Noah's chest.

As Noah's entire chest glowed bright with fire, Noah yelled at the top of his lungs. Lifting his leg, Noah kicked Enki hard in the groin with enough force that it sent him flying off him and back a few feet from him. As Noah jumped to his feet, Enki jumped to his as well. *Fire snake.* Immediately, Noah's entire body became blazed with yellow electricity-streaked fire before it jumped up and zapped with rapid speed towards Enki, resulting in Enki being engulfed in flames as his body flew back and slammed against a brick wall behind him before dropping to the ground.

As the electricity-streaked fire disappeared from Noah's body, Enki jumped back up to his feet and darted towards Noah, and as his entire arm turned into a katana, he slashed Noah in the shoulder. Noah lifted his left arm to punch Enki in the face, but Enki blocked it in time before throwing a right hook to Noah's jaw, resulting in blood splattering out of Noah's mouth. Before Noah could react, Enki delivered a left hook

to Noah's jaw.

As Noah raised his left hand to deliver a punch to Enki's face, Enki blocked it again, resulting in Noah kneeing Enki hard in the groin several times before grabbing Enki's arm and spinning him around with his back to him. Noah lifted his right hand, which instantly transformed into a blue, electricity-streaked medieval pike, which he stabbed directly into Enki's back. A gush of blood splashed everywhere as Enki let out a deep, loud, thunderous wail. Spinning quickly to face Noah, Enki broke off half of the pike, leaving the other half still inside his back. Extending out his arms and hands fast, a thick gush of fire blasted out of both of Enki's hands and into Noah's chest, sending Noah flying several feet away to the ground.

However, Noah jumped up unscathed, raced back over to Enki, and spewed a thick gush of fire from his mouth towards him. However, Enki jumped up in the air in time, missing the fire hitting him. As Enki slammed his feet back down to the ground, Noah's arm instantly transformed into a glowing purple electricity-streaked sword. Bolting over to Enki, Noah swirled the sword around before slashing the sword deep into the side of Enki's face, gushing Enki's blood all over Noah. Enki stumbled back several feet before falling to the ground.

As Enki got up, Noah sprinted over and kicked him hard in the face, sending Enki flying several feet back towards the recycling machine. Noah sprinted over to Enki, jumped on top of him, shot up his fire-engulfed fists with numerous long, slithering, glowing, red-eye snakes in the middle of them, and delivered blow after blow to Enki's face. Each time Noah delivered a blow to Enki's face, an instant vision of a tragedy he endured while down on Earth and upon his first arrival at The Summerland popped into his mind, which made him deliver each blow faster and harder. The tragedy of losing his father, the tragedy of losing his wife, then his best friend and brother, then his job, his home, the tragic suffering he and Hazel endured while at the shelter, the

tragedy of losing Hazel, the brutal beating he endured at the hands of Enki's servants at The Summerland, and the tragic torture he endured down in Klipoth. Letting out a loud yell at the top of his lungs, Noah grabbed Enki's head into his hands, and as he held it firm, Enki's head burst into red, electrifying flames. Enki let out a deep, disembodied, thunderous roar before his entire body burst into huge, red, electrifying flames and then vanished into numerous fiery sparks.

August closed his eyes while releasing a long, slow exhale. His mind immediately pictured numerous good IS-BEs standing around Klipoth, staring directly up, as if waiting for orders. August's mind then switched over to his created realm of Amagi. He pictured every home, every street corner, every park, every business, and every tree. After several seconds, he slowly opened his eyes. Dropping further back on his knees, Noah sighed with a brief close of his eyes. His body felt lighter at that moment than it ever had during his entire time in the afterlife.

"You did it, son!" Jack exclaimed as he rushed over to Noah and hugged him.

"We all did it, Dad," Noah said in a low voice, his face displaying a frown, "including you."

"Well done, Noah," August said with a smile as he walked over to Noah and Jack, "you defeated your enemy."

"I can't believe it," Christopher said as he walked over to them, "it almost feels unreal to know that Enki's finally—dead and gone."

"Well, no," August replied, "he's not gone; he'll *never* be gone. Just like us IS-BEs can't die; neither can Enki nor any of his other Anunnaki family, or even the draconians or reptilians. However, we liberated all of the trapped IS-BEs from his clutches and his realms, which means that for right now, he lost in a *huge* way, and we won."

Hearing loud shooting sounds above them, August, Noah, Christopher, and Jack looked up and saw numerous white streams of light shooting across the sky and out of sight.

“Wait, what’s that?” Noah asked. “What’s going on?”

“Those are the good, liberated IS-BEs of Klipoth,” August replied while staring at the streams, “When we liberated The Summerland, we also liberated Klipoth as well, meaning those who are good and who wish to leave there now can—including Leah.”

Noah shot an instant glare over at August as light tears filled his widened eyes.

“Yeah, she’ll be there when you get back there,” August said with a smile and a nod.

“Well, what exactly happens now?” Christopher asked.

“Well, now, we leave,” August said, “and the residents of The Summerland, if they choose to, will leave with us to go to the free Pleroma universe of Amagi, where we all belong.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Amagi

As August, Noah, Christopher, and Jack walked down the streets of Amagi with other residents of The Summerland scattered about and walking to and from as well, Noah's eyes immediately searched for where Leah would be. It wasn't until August, Noah, Christopher, and Jack turned the corner that Noah's heart abruptly stopped. He felt a hard kick in his stomach; his body immediately felt cold as ice as he saw Leah walking in their direction.

"Oh my God," Noah said as tears filled his eyes.

"Noah!" Leah exclaimed as tears filled her eyes as well.

As Leah ran over to Noah, Noah picked her up in his arms and spun her around before kissing her repeatedly and breaking into light sobs.

"Oh, Noah, I missed you so *much*!" Leah exclaimed tearfully.

"I missed you too," Noah said through his own tears. "I know August said we shouldn't say this, but—I'm sorry, I'm so sorry for what happened—"

"Shh, shh," Leah said softly. "It's all over now, honey. It is. I'm just glad we're back together now."

Looking over his shoulder, Leah smiled before pulling away from Noah and wiping her tears away.

"And Jack," Leah said, "you were *all* Noah could talk about for so many years. It is *such* an honor to meet you."

Jack smiled and nodded before pulling her into a hug.

"Same here," Jack replied. "I'm so glad to meet the beautiful

woman Noah told me had his heart.”

“Wait,” August said with a raised brow and a smile. “Um, Jack, look behind you. I think there’s someone else you’ve yet to meet too.”

Looking behind him, Jack frowned as tears clouded his widened eyes. Standing right behind him was Hazel.

“No,” Jack said in a low voice, “is that—”

“Your granddaughter?” August cut in with a smile, “it is.”

“Hi, Papaw,” Hazel said with a smile.

Jack scooped her up in his arms and hugged her tight.

“Oh princess,” Jack said tearfully, “you’re just as beautiful as I imagined! I’m so happy to meet you!”

“I’m happy to meet you too, Papaw,” Hazel said as she kissed him on the cheek.

“Look at you,” Jack said with a smile as he wiped streaming tears away, “you’ve got your daddy’s smile, your mama’s eyes and—”

“Your nose—and don’t even get me started on her huge appetite,” Noah said before sharing a laugh with Leah, August, and Christopher. “Allow her to, and she’ll eat you out of house and home.”

Jack laughed.

“Aww, that’s okay; her appetite is just a result of her being a typical Hunter, just like her papaw,” Jack said while smiling at her. “Right, baby girl?”

“That’s right!” Hazel exclaimed with a smile.

“All right,” August said with a smile. “That’s enough chit-chatting around here. There’s a huge beach barbecue that just started a few minutes ago for all of us Amagi residents to celebrate our new liberation. So, we’re going. But first, let’s go back to my place, think up some new clothes, take a quick shower—I have four bathrooms—and get dressed and then go, because there’s no way I’m going to a party looking like a deleted scene from a zombie movie.”

Christopher, Noah and Jack laugh.

While talking amongst themselves, they walked over to two SUVs parked across the street.

As darkness filled the night sky in Amagi, numerous tables lined the beach where hundreds of Amagi residents were sitting while others stood around in different areas, talking to each other. Stringed lights illuminated the beach, and “It Ain’t Over Til It’s Over” by Lenny Kravitz blared from a nearby stereo system that a DJ was operating. Situated near a makeshift bar was a male Amgai resident grilling food. As August sat at a table alone, he stirred his straw around in his glass half filled with margarita and couldn’t help but feel empty.

Sure, he had a hand in defeating Enki and he had a hand in the liberation of himself and so many others, including Jack, but for some reason, he still felt as if something was missing inside him. He looked around at Noah sitting at a table several feet away, talking and laughing with Jack, Hazel, and Leah. He then looked over at Christopher, who was at a table talking to his grandparents, two other men, and a female Amagi resident, before looking away and frowning at what was happening with him at that moment. As he stared down at his glass, tears filled his eyes. He couldn’t understand it. He should’ve been *happy* at that moment, so why wasn’t he?

“So then, that’s when he threw up *all* over me and Leah,” Noah said to Jack between laughter, “Dad, I swear, I wish you could’ve been there. He was a disaster the whole day.”

Jack shared a laugh with Leah and Hazel before shaking his head.

“See,” Jack said with a smile, “that’s why I never had alcohol at

any of the barbecues I had. The last thing I needed was Joel, drunk and trying to show off his horrible ass—Billy Ray Cyrus dance moves.”

As Jack laughed with Leah and Noah, Christopher walked over with the female Amagi resident who was sitting at his table.

“Guys,” Christopher said with a smile. “Okay, look, this is Tamara, and you all are *not* going to *believe* what she said is a thing here—well, in the afterlife.”

“Let me guess, this realm is set up so we’ll never have to pay another damn bill in our lives,” Jack joked, resulting in Leah and Noah laughing.

Christopher smiled at Jack with a brief frown before laughing silently and shaking his head.

“No, better,” Christopher said. “Let me show you, give me a second.”

Staring straight ahead, past Noah, Jack, and Hazel, Christopher squinted his eyes. Within seconds, out of thin air, a smiling Joanna appeared and walked over to where Noah, Jack, Hazel, Leah, Christopher, and Tamara were.

“Noah, Mr. Hunter,” Christopher said with a smile and a nod forward, “look behind you.”

Frowning with a raised brow, Jack looked behind him, and Noah did the same. Jack jumped up from his seat and widened his eyes.

“Joanna,” Jack said in a low voice that slightly cracked with emotion.

“Mom,” Noah said with a frown and with tears filling his eyes.

“Mamaw!” Hazel exclaimed with wide eyes and a full smile.

“Hi, Jack, Noah, Hazel,” Joanna said.

Jack pulled her into a tight hug, followed by Noah hugging her as well.

“How—how are you here?” Jack asked. “They reincarnated you; I *saw* them.”

"I know," Joanna said with a slight shake of her head as she wiped streaming tears away. "However, I *didn't* know that even when someone gets reincarnated, for as long as their IS-BE is still around, part of their IS-BE is still around in the universe, and it was from that that Christopher manifested me here. So, even though there's a part of my IS-BE in some—reincarnated person on Earth, the main part of my IS-BE is here."

Shooting a glare over at Christopher, Noah frowned as tears clouded his eyes. Rushing around the table, Noah walked over to Christopher and hugged him.

"Thank you," Noah said tearfully. "This is the *best* thing you've *ever* done for me, and I'll never forget it, *ever*."

Christopher laughed while hugging him back.

"Well, you're welcome. My bill will be in the mail. It's the *only* bill you'll have to pay here in Amagi."

As Jack, Noah, Leah, and Tamara laughed, Joanna walked over to Noah and cupped his face in her hands while smiling.

"I can't *believe* it," Joanna said tearfully. "Look at you. My little boy's all grown up now. Noah, I'm so proud of the man you've become."

Pulling her into a hug, Noah kissed her on the cheek and smiled.

"All I am is because of Dad *and* you, Mom. God, you don't know how *long* I've waited for this moment."

"Yup," Christopher said as he walked over to Joanna and Noah and put his arms around their shoulders. "Again, you're *welcome*; my *bill* will be in the mail."

Noah playfully pushed him away as he, Christopher, Joanna, and Jack laughed.

After August savored the last sips of his margarita, he couldn't help but let out a yawn that was followed by his eyelids fluttering in a slow, tired

dance. He glanced at his watch, mentally calculating that he would spend about fifteen more minutes at the barbecue before calling it a night. The truth was that the evening hadn't been as enjoyable as he'd hoped. Despite the warmth of Amagi and the company of friends, a profound, aching loneliness settled over him. He desperately wished his mother were there, her voice a constant, familiar drone, perhaps excitedly debating the Ross and Rachel saga from *Friends* or lamenting that Amagi hadn't yet manifested a fully-stocked Michaels store where she could buy all her beloved knitting yarn. His heart ached for his other family members too: *Samantha*, his wife, and their son, *Joshua*, the child they had never held on Earth. The lack of that fundamental family unit there in Pleroma was a hollow space that the beauty of that realm couldn't quite fill.

As he thought of them, a stinging sensation hit the back of his eyes. Tears immediately welled up, clouding his vision until the brilliant lights of the barbecue became fractured, shimmering halos. August blinked hard, the moisture quickly dissolving the halos. He couldn't stay. As the stereo system switched over to REM'S "Shiny Happy People," August rose swiftly, but just as he was about to walk away from the table, Hazel darted over with the energy of a spring breeze and landed in the chair opposite him.

"August, why are you all by yourself over here, August?" she asked with a curious tilt of her head.

August couldn't help but smile at her genuine question. As he settled back into his chair, a sigh escaped from him.

"Well, I was just trying to decide if I should tell your parents about your daring cookie heist last night," he teased, his eyes twinkling with mischief and a playful grin spreading across his face.

Hazel's reaction was instant—her eyes grew as round as saucers, and she gasped, a hand flying to her mouth in shock. At that moment, August's laughter filled the air, warm and infectious.

"August, you promised!" Hazel's voice wavered between indignation and worry, her wide eyes locked on his.

"Relax, I'm only kidding," August reassured her with a gentle smile. "How about we make that our little occasional joke from now on, deal?"

"I like jokes, so okay, it's a deal," Hazel replied quickly, her eyes lighting up with relief. "As long as it *stays* a joke, or else I'll never consider you my best friend ever again."

August's heart swelled at Hazel's declaration. He looked at her and a touched expression crossed his face as he took in her earnestness. The warmth of her innocence washed over him, and he smiled softly.

"Best friends," he repeated, letting the words sink in. "That really means a lot to me, Hazel, thank you."

The playful mischief from before faded for a moment and converted into a tender moment, and he could feel the importance of their bond—an adult cherishing a child's unwavering trust.

"Well," August said with a playful smile, "with us being best friends, I have to—"

August stopped and frowned at her with a slight tilt of his head.

"No, no, wait," August said with a shake of his head. "On second thought—nope, I've changed my mind; I *think* I'm going to tell *anyway*—"

"August!" Hazel exclaimed with widened eyes and a half smile, resulting in August laughing heartily.

"I'm joking, I'm joking—"

"You promise?" Hazel asked. "Cross your heart, hope to die? Stick a needle in your eye?"

August laughed again.

"Yeah, I promise," August said with a smile.

"Great!" Hazel exclaimed. "Thank you, August!"

Hazel stared at him with a frown in silence for a few seconds, it was a look that was making August shift uncomfortably in his seat. It was

the intense, disarmingly perceptive look of a child trying to pull meaning from the hidden spaces between words.

"August, you're sad," Hazel stated simply, her small face serious.

August laughed lightly—a short, nervous huff, before waving a dismissive hand.

"Who? Me? No, sweetie, I'm not sad. I'm just...tired. I've had a long day of, uh—some very exhausting work."

Hazel's eyes narrowed, and she gave him a classic "cut the bologna" expression, raising one brow just like her mother often did.

"Nope. That's baloney, August. I know you're sad," she responded, leaning forward conspiratorially. "Even though I'm only eight, my abilities in Pleroma make me a whole lot smarter than I was on Earth. I can feel the gray feeling coming off of you."

Raising a brow, August couldn't help but be completely disarmed by her profound honesty. He tried to hide the sudden catch in his throat, but failed.

"It's because you don't have a family here, or friends," Hazel continued, her voice soft with genuine sympathy. "But you don't have to worry about that anymore. You have *me*! I'm here, and I'll be your *very* best friend."

She bounced slightly in the chair.

"*And* we can watch cartoons together! I know all the best ones."

August's breath hitched, and he stared at her, overwhelmed by the pure, earnest sweetness of her intention. He laughed again, this time a genuine, warm sound that went straight to his heart.

"Aww, Hazel, that's—that's so sweet," he responded with a warm smile. "You know what? I think being your buddy would be a *blast*."

Hazel gasped and gaped while smiling.

"Really?" Hazel exclaimed.

August had to briefly look away to keep from laughing at her adorable and humorous reaction to his statement.

“Yup, absolutely,” August replied with a slight nod to her and a wink.

Without another word, Hazel scrambled out of the chair and rushed around the table. Before August could fully process her movement, she was climbing up onto his lap and throwing her small arms around his neck in a fierce, tight hug. The suddenness and sheer, unwavering sincerity of the embrace took him back, surprising him completely. He smiled, feeling the last vestiges of his earlier melancholy dissolve, and gently wrapped his arms around her, hugging her back. After a moment, she released him, her eyes sparkling with happy relief.

“Okay, I have to go now,” she said, jumping off his lap and pointing toward her parents. “My dad said right about now is when I could have ice cream! But only the kind that is sugar-free.”

She sighed dramatically, rolling her eyes in mock exasperation.

“Boy, is my dad really strict on me when it comes to sweets and sugar.”

August laughed heartily at her theatrical complaint, the sound ringing freely across the beach.

“Bye, August!” Hazel chirped, waving enthusiastically before dashing away with full childhood energy.

August sat back in his chair and laughed again at the pure adorableness and earnest sweetness of an eight-year-old child. He began to imagine what his own son might have been like at that age—so perceptive, so full of innocent love and cartoon recommendations. Thinking of the son who never had a chance to be born made August’s heart fill with sad emotions and he could feel that melancholiness creep up back inside him again. Getting up, he walked away from the table and away from the party. He left silently, allowing the laughter and music to swallow his retreat. The heaviness of his melancholiness was a physical weight settling on his shoulders with every step he took. He walked until he reached his home, which was dark and echoing. Stepping inside, he

didn't bother to turn on any lights.

He sat down on a stool at the kitchen island, enveloped completely by the darkness and the pure, terrifying silence of the empty house. He listened to it, and the silence filled him in a sad, tragic way, magnifying the void in his existence. Closing his eyes, he balled his fists until his knuckles were white and held the tension—a silent, fierce refusal to let his loneliness and sadness bloom into a chaos that could destabilize Pleroma. Resting his forehead against his clasped hands, the darkness behind his eyes transformed into memory. He heard Victoria's easy, familiar laugh.

Then, he saw Samantha's smile, blindingly bright and filled with pure excitement when they first found out they would soon be parents. He remembered in his mind the vision of the fierce joy, the shared laughter, the spontaneous dancing, the beautiful, boundless excitement—now all gone, never to come again. A single, hot tear streamed down August's cheek and was absorbed by the back of his hand. He knew the only thing that could truly make him forget what he didn't have with him in Amagi was a forced oblivion. He pushed off the stool, the scrape of wood against the floor an abrupt sound in the heavy silence, and headed to his bedroom, hoping to sleep away his pain and his sadness.

The next morning, August opened his eyes, pulling himself from the depths of a sleep that had offered no dreams, only a temporary pause in existence. He lay still in the center of his large bed, staring up at the ceiling where the morning light danced in dust motes. The question formed instantly, heavy and suffocating: *What am I going to do today?* He ran through the mental rolodex of his former life. He couldn't go to the rehab shelter; that was back on Earth, miles of reality away. He couldn't drive over to his mother's house to hear her voice, because she was still

living her life on the mortal plane. He couldn't even pop in on Nell, his literary agent, to discuss manuscript ideas or just gossip over tea. He had no deadlines, no plot holes to fix, no characters clamoring for his attention. His writing career, like everything else that had defined him, belonged to a world he no longer inhabited. So what was he going to do with himself all day? *Nothing, I'm going to do nothing.* The realization settled in his chest like lead. *I have absolutely nothing going on right now. Isn't that pathetic?*

Right then, the profound loneliness of the previous night crept back in, slinking out from the corners of the room to press against his ribs. *I don't even have a purpose here. I'm just...existing.* He yawned, a deep, shuddering reflex. His body was reminding him of the physical sensations he had manifested to make this afterlife feel grounded—the phantom weight of sleepiness that tethered him to his human habits. As another yawn stretched his jaw, he realized that the only thing capable of dragging him into functionality was coffee. He forced himself up. After a shower that felt more like a chore than a refresh and dressing in simple lounge clothes, he walked out of his bedroom and headed toward the kitchen. He stopped dead in the archway.

There, sitting on his sofa with her legs swinging happily, was Hazel. The television was blaring the theme song to the nineties sitcom *Step by Step*. August stared at her, one brow arched, a faint frown warring with a bemused smile. Why this child had formed such a magnetic attachment to him was beyond his understanding, but seeing her small form in his empty, echoing house sparked a tiny flicker of warmth. Sensing his presence, Hazel whipped her head around.

"Grand rising, August!" she chirped, her voice bursting with childhood energy.

She scrambled off the sofa and rushed over to him. August smiled and nodded, genuinely amused by her enthusiasm.

"Hazel," he greeted, still bemused. "Does your parents know

you're here?"

Hazel giggled, rocking back on her heels.

"Of course! I told them how lonely and sad you were and how I wanted to be your buddy until you get new friends and family. They said I could, so I'm here! And I made you coffee."

August stared at her, displaying a deep frown of astonishment.

"You *what*?"

"I made you coffee," she repeated proudly.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the kitchen island.

"Look! I climbed onto the counter—but don't worry, I kept my tennis shoes on so I wouldn't slip and fall. I grabbed the coffee jar and the sugar and put it in your cup, and then I added water from the tap."

She pointed to the corner of the counter.

"Then I put it on the coffee warmer thingy over there."

August looked at the mug sitting on the warmer, then back at her, an almost speechless smile taking over his face.

"And...and you knew how to do *all* that?"

She giggled again, scrunching her nose.

"Of course, my mom taught me, silly!"

He laughed, a sound that was half amusement and half genuine surprise, before scooping her up into his arms.

"Thank you, Hazel. You are so sweet and considerate."

Hazel beamed while hugging him.

"What are best buddies for?"

Suddenly, a sound from the television caught her attention. She gasped, wiggling to be put down.

"Ooh, there's Cody! Come on, August, grab your coffee and come over to the sofa so you can watch with me!"

Before August could respond, she was rushing away, dropping onto the cushions and instantly becoming engrossed in the show. August stood there for a moment, shaking his head lightly at the sheer force of

her energy. He walked to the warmer and picked up the mug. To his surprise, it was hot. He took a tentative sip and raised his eyebrows with even more surprise that it was actually pretty good. With a half-smile, he walked over to the sofa and dropped down beside her. For the next two hours, the crushing silence of the house was kept at bay by the sounds of *Step by Step* and, eventually, *Tom & Jerry*—a suggestion of Hazel's that August didn't mind in the least, as the cat-and-mouse antics reminded him of his own childhood. Just as Jerry was outsmarting Tom for the third time, the doorbell rang.

"I'll be right back," August told Hazel with Hazel nodding and August setting his half empty mug on the coffee table.

He went to the door and opened it to find Noah standing on the porch.

"Hey, Noah," August said before exchanging a handshake and a quick bro-hug with Noah.

"Hey," Noah responded, "how's your A.M. going?"

August immediately engaged the protective mechanism he had perfected over the years. He displayed his protective August Cameron charismatic smile—bright, dazzling, and completely hollow.

"It's going great, yeah, just great."

After looking over August's shoulder and half-smiling as he spotted his daughter on the sofa, still glued to the cartoons, Noah laughed lightly.

"She *really* has an attachment to you, doesn't she?" Noah stated.

"I know," August said, his smile softening into something more genuine. "She actually came over here this morning to fix me coffee. I'm still in shock over it."

Noah laughed.

"Oh yeah, she does that with me and Leah some mornings. All by herself, too. She calls it being our 'little mini-helper.'"

August laughed.

"That's adorable."

"She talks about you a lot at home too," Noah continued. "She's even started calling you 'Uncle August.'"

August blinked, visibly surprised.

"Really?"

"Yeah. And honestly, I think it's great. Universe knows we need some uncles who can take her off me and Leah's hands sometimes."

August laughed again.

"Well, she's welcome anytime."

"Actually," Noah said, shifting his stance, "I came to get her off your hands now. We're heading out."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, Hazel, Leah, and I are going over to my parents' house. My dad manifested a Castles N' Coasters amusement park here and he got us some tickets, so we're all going for the day."

For a brief second, August's mask slipped. A flicker of disappointment crossed his eyes at the realization that his eight year old buddy was leaving, followed immediately by a quiet, hopeful silence. He waited for the sentence that would naturally follow: *You should come with us.*

"That sounds...cool," August said, nodding, still displaying a smile.

"I asked Christopher if he wanted to come," Noah added casually, "and he said he might but it might be later in the day."

August stood there, staring at Noah. The silence stretched for a heartbeat, then two. His heart thumped a slow, painful rhythm against his ribs, waiting for the invitation. *We're going. Chris is going. You should come too.* But Noah simply turned away from the front door and called out into the living room.

"Hazel! Come on, sweetie. It's time to go to Memaw and Pawpaw's house."

Hazel scrambled off the sofa with a squeal of excitement.

“Yay! Castles N’ Coasters!”

She rushed toward the front door, grabbing Noah’s hand. But just before they crossed the threshold, Hazel stopped. She unlinked her hand from her father’s and darted back to August. She wrapped her small arms around his waist, burying her face in his shirt.

“I’ll see you, August,” she said, looking up at him with wide, adoring eyes. “If not tomorrow, then the day after that. I love you.”

The moment pierced through August’s defenses. His expression folded into pure tenderness. He stooped down and hugged her back.

“Aww, I love you too, kiddo.”

She released him and skipped back to her father. August stood up and exchanged another handshake and hug with Noah.

“Hey,” Noah said, clapping August on the shoulder, “maybe me, you, and Chris can get together tomorrow for coffee or something?”

August, the hurt of the exclusion burning in his chest, forced a nod and a smile.

“Yeah. That sounds great.”

“All right. See ya, August.”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

August closed the door. The silence rushed back in instantly, heavier than before. The only sound was the faint, manic orchestral music of the cartoons still playing to an empty room. August leaned his back against the door, letting the smile drop from his face like a heavy stone. The hurt was visible now, etched into the lines around his eyes and mouth.

Why are you surprised? He chided himself. *It’s not like you and Noah are friends. Not like he and Chris are friends. They’re practically family. You and Noah weren’t even friends on Earth, so why would you be in Pleroma? Of course he wouldn’t invite you.* He pushed off the door and wandered aimlessly into the living room. He drifted toward the large bay window that looked out onto the street. It was a picture-perfect

neighborhood, bathed in the golden, unnatural perfection of Pleroma's sunlight. Across the street, a couple in their mid-forties sat on a porch swing, their legs touching, heads thrown back in shared laughter. A few doors down, through an open kitchen window, he saw a family gathered around a table. He couldn't hear them, but he saw the animated gestures, the passing of food, the communal joy of simply being together. Seeing everyone else with a place, with a purpose, with *someone*, made the melancholy surge up his throat.

It made him wish, with a desperate, aching intensity, that he had that. Just a fraction of it. He closed his eyes and let out a long, shaky sigh. Shrugging to the empty room, August turned and walked back to the sofa. He dropped down onto the cushions, picked up the remote, and changed the channel. The face of Montel Williams filled the screen. August stared at the television, watching the guests argue and the audience clap, but his mind was miles away. He felt the loneliness settling in around him, a thick, gray fog of boredom and isolation that he knew, with dreaded certainty, was going to stay with him for a very long time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

August was deeply asleep, having drifted off on the sofa sometime after Noah and Hazel left, the muffled sounds of the television now showing an episode of *Miami Vice*. He was in his dream, sitting at the kitchen table in his Amagi home. The morning sun poured through the window, bright and perfect. Across from him sat his mother, Victoria, nursing a mug of tea, and beside her, his wife, Samantha. They were laughing—a warm, contagious sound—over one of Victoria’s characteristic jokes about August’s terrible fashion sense back on Earth. The three of them were a complete, perfect unit, sharing easy conversation, comfortable silence, and punctuated by bursts of hearty laughter.

It was everything August had yearned for since his arrival. Then, slowly, subtly, the light began to change. August frowned, feeling an unnatural chill in the room. He watched in slow-motion horror as the edges of Samantha’s shoulder began to shimmer. Victoria, mid-sentence, seemed to lose definition, her form becoming hazy. They were evaporating, dissolving into fine, colorless dust, their smiles remaining frozen on their faces even as their physical presence began to fade.

“Mom?” August whispered, his dream-voice choked.

The slowness vanished, replaced by terrifying speed. Samantha’s form became a rapid cascade of vanishing particles. August shot up from his chair, his heart seized by panic.

“No! No! No! Don’t go!” he shouted, his voice tearing in desperation.

He rushed around the table, his arms outstretched, but it was too late. Victoria and Samantha vanished completely into thin, empty air,

leaving only the residue of bright morning light where they had been. August spun around, tearful eyes shooting across the kitchen, scanning the cupboards, the doorways, the empty chairs.

“Samantha! Victoria!” August shouted, the sound of his voice hollow and agonizing in the sudden, echoing silence—



Immediately August awakened with his eyes snapping open as he loudly gasped. He quickly sat bolt upright on the sofa, his face glistening in cold perspiration. His heart hammered violently against his ribs. Out of breath, he pressed a hand to his racing chest and squeezed his eyes shut briefly, letting the vivid terror of the nightmare recede. He swallowed hard, but the painful lump of emotion in his throat wouldn't budge, restricting his breath. The nightmare of having his family with him, only to watch them dissolve right in front of him—had stripped him bare, leaving him exposed to the rawest form of grief. He waged a silent, furious war inside his body.

His jaw locked, straining the muscles in his neck and shoulders, and he clenched his fists so violently that the crescent moons of his nails dug painfully into his palms. This pressure, this deliberate, controlled physical agony, was the only thing keeping the collapse at bay; he needed to fight the seismic urge that threatened to unravel his entire self into tears and shouts. His entire being was focused on maintaining a rigid, unbroken shell.

Finally, he opened his eyes, staring blankly at the *Miami Vice* rerun on the screen, the colorful action a stark, meaningless contrast to the internal void of his fear. He snatched up the remote and turned off the television before tossing the remote across his coffee table. Then he dropped his head into his trembling hands and let out a long, loud, shuddering exhale that was less a release and more a painful surrender

to the melancholy. He was safe, he was in Pleroma, but the silence of the empty house, and the persistent ache of his loneliness, felt heavier than ever before.

Noah drove the large SUV, with Leah in the front passenger seat and Jack, Joanna, Christopher, and Hazel filling the back rows, with Christopher having a souvenir cup the size of a fire extinguisher lodged in a cup holder beside him. The car was loud with a tired but happy chatter following their day out at Castles N' Coasters.

"I mean, come on," Jack said with a smile, "did the Ascension deliver or *what*? That triple inversion, right over the ocean, was *exactly* how it looked in my head!"

Hazel pressed both hands to her stomach like she was guarding a treasure.

"I know!" Hazel exclaimed. "I thought my guts were gonna fly right out and land on the boardwalk."

Leah half-turned in her seat, amused.

"Yeah, your guts and the three metric tons of sugar you inhaled. You, missy, are on candy probation for the next two weeks."

"Mom!" Hazel wailed, though the grin on her face said she didn't mind the sentencing.

Noah laughed while looking through his rear view mirror at Hazel.

"Your mom's got a point, princess. You definitely need a sugar hiatus after taking down not one, not two, but *three* cotton-candy meteorites. You practically sent your teeth into overdrive today."

"Sent your teeth into overdrive?" Christopher echoed with a faint frown, a brow raised and a half smile. "Bruh, you sound like some corny-ass PBS after-school special. 'Remember, kids, floss or you'll send your teeth into overdrive!' Man, if you don't get that lame ass Mister

Rogers shit outta here.”

Christopher, Noah and Jack laughed before Noah briefly met Christopher’s eyes in the rearview mirror, while half smiling.

“Whatever, Chris, look, I’m just trying to keep my princess from turning into a sugar-powered hurricane—unlike a certain forty-ounce-slushie enthusiast sitting in my backseat.”

Noah raised his brows at Christopher while glancing at him through the rearview mirror once again, resulting in Christopher laughing. Christopher held the cup aloft like a championship trophy.

“Jealousy’s a disease, my guy. *Hydration*, that’s all this is. Don’t blame me ’cause your old-man bladder can’t hang.”

Christopher and Jack laughed and Noah playfully rolled his eyes at Christopher before shaking his head and lightly laughing. However, right then, Noah’s gaze snagged on the horizon—and stayed there. Noah leaned forward, his eyes narrowed, staring out the windshield. The sky above Amagi, which was always an impossibly clear, vibrant azure, was beginning to shift. It was not a slow transition; it felt sudden, going from sky blue and clear to a dense, oppressive dark gray.

“Hey, guys,” Noah said. “Do you see that? Look at the sky.”

The chattering immediately ceased as everyone followed Noah’s gaze.

“Wow, how’d it get dark that quick?” Jack said with a frown.

“It looks like rain!” Hazel exclaimed with her face smashed to the glass.

“Which is why I’m glad we’re on our way back home,” Leah said while looking out her window at the sky.

“No,” Noah said with a slight shake of his head. “That’s not rain. Clouds don’t move like that. This feels...heavy.”

Christopher raised a brow while staring up at the sky.

“Yeah, bruh,” Christopher said, “this ain’t regular weather. This is—*vibe* weather. Somebody’s dumping straight negativity into the

system.”

Christopher shook his head.

“August told me the sky in Pleroma’s basically a giant mood ring for the whole damn city.”

“Really?” Leah asked with brows raised. “You’re serious?”

“Oh yeah,” Christopher replied. “It takes a hell of a lot of pain to stain the sky like this.”

Silence settled, broken only by the tires thrumming over asphalt. A single image flashed in Noah’s mind: *August*. Noah swallowed, still staring at the bruised horizon.

“I know who’s causing this,” Noah murmured, his voice rough with sudden certainty.

Christopher’s dark brows knit as he stared at Noah and Noah could feel Christopher’s eyes on him, but Noah didn’t answer. Noah just pressed a bit harder on the gas, as if speed alone could outrun whatever storm was gathering over Amagi.

August stood over the glistening white marble sink in his bathroom, aggressively splashing cold water onto his face. He scrubbed at his temples and neck, trying to erase the still clinging effects of the nightmare that had left him trembling and gasping on the sofa. No matter how much water he used, the brutal image of Samantha and Victoria dissolving into dust kept running through his mind—a cruel, mocking reminder of the sadness and emotional pain he’d endured. He pressed his hands down hard on the edge of the sink, the cold marble grounding him slightly. He squeezed his eyes shut and began a silent mini-meditation/affirmation session right there, desperately trying to lock the grief back away.

It was a session that was instantly and forcefully interrupted by

his doorbell ringing—a loud, demanding chime that echoed through the quiet house. After a final, ragged exhale, August dried his face with a towel and then left the bathroom and headed for the front door, his face already set in his practiced mask of charming indifference. August unlocked and pushed open his screen door to find Noah standing on his porch, a faint, concerned smile etched beneath his serious gaze.

“Hey, how was Castles N’ Coasters?” August asked, instantly forcing a cheerful, charismatic smile.

Noah didn’t immediately respond. He stared up at the sky, still seeing it in the dark, cloudy condition that it was in when he was driving earlier. August followed Noah’s gaze and saw the clouds himself: a heavy slate rolling low, like a lid clamped over the city. For a few seconds, August’s eyes widened and his chest tightened—he knew *exactly* whose turmoil had brushed those colors across the sky. But admitting that would have meant unveiling the storm raging inside him, and his pride wouldn’t allow it. Better to feign ignorance and let Noah blame some other poor soul in Pleroma for the atmospheric gloom. So August swallowed the truth, smoothed the worrying frown from his face, and once again slipped on his bright-eyed expression of easy nonchalance—his “everything’s fine” mask that he’d worn so long it almost felt like skin.

“Uh, Noah?” August asked, one brow arched and a half-smile tugging at his mouth. “You okay? You look more confused than Rose Nylund at a MENSA mixer.”

August followed the line with a light, airy laugh—but the sound rang wrong, like cheap glassware clinking off-key. Noah’s gut tightened. He could practically taste the low, humming dissonance pouring off August. August was broadcasting misery at a frequency that Noah picked up on loud and clear. Noah forced a short, gentle laugh that held a surprising depth of worry.

“Castles N’ Coasters was great but—as far as if I’m okay,

well—actually, I think I should be asking you that question,” Noah said, while staring at August with a brow raised.

August briefly frowned, a micro-crease knifing between his brows, and his shoulders sagged for the tiniest heartbeat—just long enough for Noah to briefly glimpse the raw pain underneath. The gray overhead seemed to thicken, matching the momentary slip in August’s façade. Then, just as quickly, the mask snapped back into place. August gave a small, dismissive shake of his head before forcing out a paper-thin laugh.

“Yeah, yeah, Noah, I’m—as fine as a glass of wine. Why d’you ask?” August responded, pairing the rhyme with a breezy shrug that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

The cheery tone floated there, brittle and see-through, while Noah watched, unconvinced.

“August,” Noah said softly with his brows raised, “I can read people now, remember? I also can now feel when low-vibrational energy is circulating through people. You’re bullshitting me.”

August’s forced smile wavered for a split second, the effort costing him a visible twitch near his mouth, before he let out a short, hollow, coy laugh. He knew instantly that Noah’s new spiritual acuity had seen straight through his B.S. But even with his vulnerability exposed, August refused to yield. He immediately reinforced the mask, instantly locking down the chink in his armor. He doubled down on the ‘August Cameron’ persona, the charismatic, cool confidence that was both his genuine nature and his ultimate shield of protection. He laughed again, softly this time, and shrugged with an exaggerated, forced lightness, determined to sell the performance until Noah backed off of him.

“Don’t worry about me, Noah,” August said, forcing a brave, strong tone. “I’m fine, I’m—August Cameron, remember? I’m—built differently. I’m fine, *really*.”

Noah’s face was etched with a sad frown that contradicted

August's bluster. He simply nodded, knowing better but respecting the denial.

"Well—good," Noah replied, "I hope so because your birthday is next Saturday, and we've all already started planning something."

August's entire demeanor shifted. His forced smile dropped, replaced by genuine, slightly wide-eyed surprise.

"You all did? *Seriously?*" August asked, visibly touched. "Wow, that's...that's *incredibly* thoughtful of you all. Thank you."

As Noah nodded, August sighed and nodded as well.

"August," Noah said, taking a step forward towards him, "I—"

August didn't let him finish. He *couldn't*. If Noah launched into a stronger torrent of concerned questions about August's vibrational energy, August knew his thin, protective mask would shatter instantly. So he needed to create distance, *immediately*.

"Right, well," August cut in, clapping his hands together briskly. "Noah, I um—I actually have to get back inside and, uh—get some things done before nightfall."

The speed with which August avoided eye contact after the statement was a clear sign to Noah that he was lying, he had *nothing* to get done.

"Thanks for stopping by though, I appreciate it," August said with a fleeting smile.

Before Noah could reply, August patted his shoulder, then turned and disappeared into the tragic silence of his empty house, leaving Noah on the porch to stare up at the bruised, unresponsive sky, a deep frown carving his face.

Earth

Hansen Cemetery was a scene of stark, somber beauty. Beneath a sky

heavy with bruised, expectant clouds—the kind that held the threat of rain but never released it—a huge crowd had gathered. The sea of black coats and somber faces was far greater than Victoria had anticipated, a silent testament to the vast, complex life her son had lived. At the center of the gathering rested August's final earthly container: a beautiful, super expensive coffin crafted from polished wood and plated in a shiny, rich gold. Resting atop it was a magnificent spray of gold lilies, their large heads bowed like mourners. Beside the coffin stood a large, easel-mounted photograph—a color portrait of a smiling August, his brown hair artfully tousled, his bright blue eyes radiating the charisma that had defined him.

An older Black man, his voice rich with experience and pain, stood near the headstone, singing. He was performing Donny Hathaway's "A Song for You," and his delivery was agonizingly beautiful. Victoria stood rigid, her eyes locked on the gold coffin, feeling the ground tilting beneath her. She hadn't been able to cry until this moment, seeing the finality of the closed casket. The words of the song seemed to speak directly to the long, tumultuous, but ultimately touching and deeply loving mother-son relationship they had shared.

"I know your image of me is what I hoped to be," the Black man sang, "I treated you unkindly But darling, can't you see? There's no one more important to me, baby, can't you see through me?"

A guttural sob finally tore from her throat. Her sister immediately wrapped her arms around Victoria, pulling her close in a fierce, protective embrace. But the hug only intensified the storm of grief. Victoria buried her face against Jackie's shoulder, the sound of the singer's voice and the image of August's smiling photo shattering her control. As the powerful vocal climax faded into a hush, leaving only the echo of soul and sorrow in the air, Victoria pulled away from her sister. With heavy, deliberate steps, she moved to the coffin. She laid her trembling hand on the cool, metallic edge of the gold lid, leaning close.

“Sleep well, honey bunny,” Victoria said tearfully.

People at the burial plot began to turn and walk away, their footsteps muffled on the wet grass. Victoria’s sister returned, and gently but firmly took Victoria’s arm, and physically guided her toward the waiting funeral car. Victoria didn’t resist, her body was heavy and defeated, the tears streamed freely down her face as they walked away from the grave. Sliding into the back seat, Victoria stared out the tinted window at the receding figures.

Through the blur of tears, she didn’t just hear the silence; she heard August’s laughter echoing in her ears. She pictured his brilliant, effortless smile, the way he could light up a room just by walking into it. The devastating realization hit her with the force of a physical blow: she was truly alone. Her baby boy, the other half of her soul, the person she loved and cherished more than anything, was gone from her world. She was left only with the memories, and the emptiness felt infinite.

Amagi

August made his way through the living room toward the kitchen, his footsteps the only sound in the vast emptiness of the house. The kitchen was bathed in soft afternoon light filtering through the window above the sink. August moved mechanically toward the coffee maker, pulling a mug from the cabinet with practiced ease. He spooned grounds into the filter, his movements precise, controlled—the same movements he’d made a thousand times before, back on Earth, in another kitchen, in another life.

As the coffee began to brew, filling the kitchen with its rich, familiar aroma, August leaned forward against the counter and stared at the machine. The gurgling and hissing sounds seemed unnaturally loud in the quiet house. He reached over and flicked on the stereo that sat on the counter, hoping for something upbeat, something to lift the

heaviness that had settled within him and that had saturated the sky of Amagi with darkness. However, what came on was the opening French notes of “Love Story” by Indila. It drifted through the speakers—slow, melancholic, and achingly beautiful. The rhythm, however, was languid and sorrowful, the melody wrapped around him like a cold, inescapable embrace. The familiar, expressive language only amplified the tragedy woven into the singer’s voice. August’s hand froze on the counter. *Of course. Of course this would be what plays.*

He thought of turning it off or changing the station and finding something—*anything*—else. But he didn’t move. He just stood there, letting the mournful music wash over him, and somehow it made everything worse. The slow, depressive rhythm seemed to perfectly echo the emptiness inside him, tugging relentlessly at the protective threads he’d spent years keeping tightly wound. In the methodical act of waiting for his coffee to get ready, his focus shattered. He began to replay Noah’s words, the calm, unnerving certainty: *“I also can now feel when low-vibrational energy is circulating through people. You’re bullshitting me.”*

Noah’s words echoed in August’s mind, unwelcome and persistent. August’s jaw tightened. He crossed his arms over his chest, then uncrossed them, then gripped the edge of the counter. The coffee maker continued its rhythmic brewing, oblivious to the storm beginning to build inside him. His fingers tightened on the counter’s edge until his knuckles went white. He *was* fine. He *had* to be fine. He’d been fine for years. He’d built an earthly empire on being fine, on being *August Cameron*: the spiritual guide, the bestselling author, the man who had all the answers. The man who helped everyone else navigate their darkness while keeping his own carefully locked away.

But there, in his kitchen, in the beautiful home that he had thought-manifested, there *was* no empire. No books to write. No lectures to give. No interviews where he could smile and deflect and

inspire. No shelter to run. No lost souls to save. Just *him*. Just the silence. Just the truth he'd been outrunning for longer than he cared to admit. The coffee maker sputtered its final drops, and August reached for it, his hand trembling slightly. He poured the dark liquid into his mug, watching it swirl and steam. And then, without warning, the thoughts came—the ones he'd been holding at bay with meditation and routine and carefully constructed walls: His mother's face flashed through his mind. Not the cold, distant woman who'd cut him from her life, but the woman before that. The woman who'd read him bedtime stories. The woman who'd believed in him before the world did.

The woman who'd looked at him like he was worth something before she decided he wasn't. The spoon slipped from his fingers, clattering against the counter. And then Samantha. *God*, Samantha. Her laugh. The way she'd touch his face when he was spiraling, grounding him with just the warmth of her palm against his cheek. The way she'd filled every empty space in his life with light, with purpose, with love so complete that he'd almost—*almost*—forgotten about the gaping wound his mother had left behind. *Almost*.

August's breath hitched. His vision blurred. No. No, no, no—but the dam was breaking, and he couldn't stop it, not now. Not when there was nothing left to distract him from the crushing, suffocating weight of his grief. Lowering his head, he gripped the counter's edge with both hands, and then—he *broke*. The sobs came hard and fast, tearing through him with a force that bent him forward.

His shoulders shook. His breaths came in ragged, uneven gasps. Tears streamed from his eyes, hot and relentless, and he couldn't stop them. He didn't even try. Years of holding it together. Years of being strong. Years of being *August Cameron*. All of it crumbled in that moment, leaving only the raw, aching truth: he was *hurting*, *deeply hurting*. Heavy, loud sobs racked his body, and for the first time in longer than he could remember, August Cameron had no mask to hide behind.

Noah had walked halfway down the block from August's house when he stopped abruptly. *The cake.* The thought slammed into him with the force of a sudden realization. He'd been so consumed by August's emotional state that he'd completely forgotten the most vital detail for the surprise party: what kind of birthday cake he wanted. This wasn't just any party; this was August's first birthday since entering Amagi, and they were trying to give the man who seemed to have everything—something truly special.

If they were going to pull off a proper, heartfelt birthday celebration that weekend, they needed to get this right. The cake wasn't just dessert; it was a symbol of normalcy and genuine affection. Noah quickly spun around and headed straight back to August's screen door. Noah opened it and stepped inside. And then he heard it. The sound stopped Noah *cold*.

It was muffled, but unmistakable—the kind of crying that came from somewhere deep and broken, the kind that couldn't be contained or controlled. Noah's heart clenched. He moved quietly through the entryway, following the sound toward the kitchen, and when he rounded the corner, he saw him. August stood facing the counter with his head bowed low, and his shoulders trembling with the force of his sobs. His hands gripped the counter like it was the only thing keeping him upright. The sound of his crying filled the kitchen—raw, unguarded, and completely and utterly shattered.

Noah froze, stunned by what he was seeing. August appeared to Noah to always have everything together. August seemed to always be the steady hand, the calm voice, the lighthouse in everyone else's storm. But this—this was *different*. This was August stripped bare, all his carefully constructed armor lying in pieces around him. Noah stood there for a long moment, unsure whether to speak, whether to intrude on something so private and devastating. But he couldn't just leave. Not now. Not when August so clearly needed someone—even if he'd never

admit it. Noah took a quiet breath.

“August,” Noah said.

August didn't respond, as he was too consumed by the force of his sobs.

“August,” Noah called again, louder this time.

The reaction was immediate and almost painful to watch. At Noah's shout, August flinched, and his shoulders snapped straight. His sobs strangled to silence, but a tremor still ran through him. His eyes throbbed, his lids were slightly swollen and burning from his severe sobbing. He scrubbed his wet face with shaking hands, then cleared his throat, not once but twice, each scrape thick and raw.

“Oh—” August's voice came out hoarse, unsteady.

August turned his head slightly in Noah's direction, but not enough to let Noah see his eyes. August's profile was tense, his jaw was tight, every muscle working overtime to pull himself back together. He let out a short, breathy laugh—forced and brittle.

“Noah. Hey. What—what are you doing back here?”

August laughed again, lighter this time and more practiced.

“I thought you left,” August added.

Noah stared at him, his frown deepening with sympathy and frustration. Everything about August at that moment screamed *pain*. His breathing was uneven, and even from where Noah stood, he could see August's hands trembling. Noah walked slowly toward him, his footsteps soft against the kitchen floor.

“I came back because I forgot to ask you something, but—”

Noah paused, stopping just a few feet away, his eyes fixed on August's averted face.

“August, what's really going on with you?”

August let out another laugh, this one a little louder, a little more defensive. He kept his gaze firmly locked on the counter beside him, refusing to look up.

"Going on with me?" August repeated, his tone light but edged with something brittle. "Nothing's going on with me. What are you talking about?"

August grabbed his coffee mug and walked around Noah toward the sofa in the living room. August sat down on the sofa, cradling the mug in both hands, still not meeting Noah's eyes. Noah followed him, his frustration mounting. He sat next to August, angling his body toward him.

"Why are you lying, August?"

August's expression flickered—just for a second—a brief frown that he quickly smoothed away with a practiced smile. He glanced down at his coffee, slightly swirling it around with his spoon.

"Lying?" August said before letting out a soft laugh and shaking his head. "I'm not lying about anything, Noah. I don't know *what* you're talking about."

August lifted the mug to his lips, but before he could take a sip, Noah's hand shot out and snatched the cup from his grasp. Coffee sloshed over the rim, spilling onto the coffee table in front of them in dark droplets. August froze, his hand still briefly suspended in the air where the mug had been. Lowering his hand, August stared at the spilled coffee for a moment, then slowly raised an eyebrow. He let out a long, deliberate sigh, accompanied by a roll of his eyes and a smirk that didn't reach anywhere near his heart. His brow remained raised as he let out a short, breathy laugh—irritation simmering just beneath the surface.

"Okay, Noah," he said, his voice dropping slightly, tighter now. "You're starting to get on my nerves. All right?"

"Yeah? Well, you're starting to get on *mine*," Noah shot back, his voice sharp.

August let out a light laugh, his eyebrows shooting up in mock surprise. But as his laugh faded, his gaze flicked up—just for a moment—and locked onto Noah's. It was a mistake that August didn't

mean to make. His eyes were red-rimmed and still glistening with the remnants of tears, raw and vulnerable in a way that completely contradicted the casual smirk on his face.

"What?" August said, his tone dripping with incredulity. "I'm getting on your nerves? Noah, you're the one repeatedly pestering me with all these—psychiatric questions, and then you just *snatched* my coffee out of my hand. You're lucky I don't go off on you right now."

August laughed again, shorter this time, and reached over to snatch the mug back from Noah's hand, pulling it toward himself with a sharp, defensive motion. But Noah had seen enough. The anger that had been simmering in him finally boiled over.

"For fuck's sake, would you stop that?" Noah's voice exploded, loud and raw.

August blinked and faintly frowned, his smile faltering slightly. Defiance locked around August like armor. He fixed his gaze on the dark surface of the coffee, willing its heat to cauterize what was left of the urge to break. Every muscle screamed for the release of tears, yet he held the line; his sobs would not return. Rigid emotional control was a survival mechanism forged in childhood—a relentless conditioning from his uncle, the man who had served as his primary, albeit inconsistent, father figure. The man's words were etched into August's psyche like scars: boys and real men never cry; they are tough, in control, invulnerable. To his uncle, crying was "unmanly," a "sissy's" frailty to be stamped out at all costs.

Every injury and every heartache in August's youth had been met with the same command to "*man up*." Each slip had brought a sneer or a lecture that branded itself deeper than any bruise. So now, shame crawled over August's skin at the mere memory of his recent breakdown. He had cracked the dam, exposing the very weakness he'd been trained to fear above all else. He tightened his jaw, locking every muscle, and swore the breach would stay sealed.

"Stop what?" August asked, his tone still light, still playing dumb, though the confusion in his expression seemed almost genuine now.

August shook his head and lifted the mug to his lips again, taking a deliberate sip while faintly smiling.

"*That!*" Noah gestured sharply at him, his voice shaking with frustration. "August, I know something's *wrong*. Again, I have abilities now too, remember? Just like you. And I can feel it—the energy around you. It's heavy. It's *dark*. It's like you're *drowning* in it—"

Noah paused, his voice softening just slightly, but still firm.

"And that's not even counting the fact that I *saw* you, August. I saw you crying."

The words hit August like a physical blow, like a hammer to plate steel—and the steel buckled. August's practiced smile vanished, his eyes losing their manufactured glint. He stared at the coffee table as if it might open a trapdoor and let him escape. Heat burned up his neck; shame crawled across his skin. August's fingers tightened around the mug, and for a heartbeat he considered deflecting—one more joke, one more lie. But Noah had witnessed the collapse; he had felt the darkness, so there was nowhere left to hide. A long, heavy silence stretched between them. Then, August's throat bobbed as he swallowed hard. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, icy and stripped of all the false cheer.

"All right, fine, what do you want me to tell you, Noah?"

"The *truth*," Noah said firmly, "what is going on with you?"

August stared down at his coffee with a deep frown and was silent for several seconds.

"When I was on Earth, it started before I was even born," August finally said in a low, hollow voice. "Enki took my father from me before I ever got the chance to meet him. That was the first void, the original, bottomless hole. Then my mother—she cut me out of her life completely over—religion, and it just layered the hurt on top of the original

emptiness. It hurt more than I ever let anyone know. But then I had *Samantha*. Samantha and I had been together since freshman year of high school. *Samantha*—Samantha was my first and only.”

August’s voice softened each time he said her name, and for a moment, the hollowness seemed to drain out of him, replaced by something quieter, sadder.

“And despite the fact that there was this gaping, painful void in my heart from being fatherless and then motherless, Samantha filled it. She filled it with her love. With her presence. She was this...blissful distraction from the fact that I had a hole inside me that my mother left.”

August’s voice began to quiver now.

“When Samantha died, my world was completely shattered. That despair led me to put a gun to my head, determined to end it all. But here’s the unbelievable part: every time I pulled the damn trigger while aiming at myself, the gun wouldn’t go off. Then, I pointed it at the wall—and it fired instantly.”

August let out a short, hollow sound—a dry, mirthless scoff—followed by a quick intake of breath that caught in his throat like a sharp snort. He shook his head slowly as a ghost of a smile appeared, not of amusement though, but of utter, weary disbelief at the absurdity of it all.

“Anyway, after Samantha died, the emptiness came back,” August continued, “but it was bigger this time. Because now I wasn’t just missing my mother and my father—the only family I ever truly had—I was missing my wife. The only love I had. The only person who made me feel like I wasn’t alone in this world.”

A tear streamed from August’s eye, and August quickly swiped at it with the back of his hand, but more followed. His eyes were glistening now, the dam cracking further with every word.

“So I figured—” August’s voice broke, and he had to stop, swallowing hard before continuing. “I figured if I just kept busy, you

know? If I worked around the clock, kept my mind completely distracted, threw myself into my writing, my research, my interviews, my lectures—if I just kept moving, then I wouldn't have to think about it. How lonely I felt, how much I missed them. That persona—the 'August Cameron' you and everyone else knows—it became my armor, my protection. And I wore it every single day because if I didn't, I'd fall apart."

August let out a bitter, hollow laugh, shaking his head.

"And it worked. For years, it worked. There was a point, before I died, where my mother actually reconnected with me, and for a while, the loneliness completely evaporated and I was okay, I really was."

August's hands were slightly trembling now, and once again, he was gripping his coffee cup so tightly that his knuckles had turned pale white.

"But now—"

August's breath hitched, and he squeezed his eyes shut as tears streamed.

"Now I'm here, in Amagi. There's no career, no rehab shelter for me to run, and the warmth of my mother's return is gone. No interviews. No lectures. Jack doesn't need my help anymore. You don't need my help anymore. And I have no choice but to sit here and face the fact that I'm *alone*. That I've *been* alone this whole time. And I don't—Noah, I don't know how to—"

August stopped as the words splintered in his throat. He felt the old, iron commandment—that boys and real men don't cry—clang inside his skull, but talking to Noah was like leaning against a cracked dam: the pressure had nowhere left to go. This time, he purposely chose to break his uncle's rule instead of letting the rule break him. August's voice gave out completely, collapsing into a ragged sob. He turned his face away, but it was already too late. The tears came hard and fast. August lowered his head and his shoulders shook violently as sobs tore through

him—raw, unfiltered, utterly broken. Noah's heart broke watching him. Without hesitation, Noah reached out and pulled August into the firm, grounding embrace of a hug.

“Hey,” Noah said softly. “Hey, it's okay. It's all right.”

August didn't pull away. He couldn't. He just collapsed slightly into Noah's hold, his heavy, loud sobs slightly muffled against Noah's shoulder. For the first time in years, the great August Cameron let the façade publicly shatter, surrendering fully to the raw, broken devastation, and Noah held him through it—a steady, rock-solid presence. It was an embrace of unwavering, fraternal loyalty, letting August know with every second of that grip that he wasn't alone. Not anymore.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

After several agonizing minutes, the tempest within August began to subside. He pulled back, sniffing hard, his face wet and flushed. He quickly wiped away the remaining tears streaming from his eyes, his hands trembling with unease. He immediately began rebuilding his wall, starting with defiance.

"You know," August said, his voice still thick with emotion but edged with that familiar August Cameron deflection, "if you tell anyone that I just cried all over your damn shoulder like some pathetic mess, I will *personally* kick your ass, abilities or no abilities."

A small, breathy laugh escaped Noah despite everything, and he shook his head, the corner of his mouth lifting in a faint smile.

"Your secret's safe with me, I promise," Noah replied, "but August...it's *okay* to *not* be okay. There's no shame in that. You know that, right?"

August opened his mouth to respond—probably with some quip or deflection—but the words died on his lips as his gaze drifted past Noah, to the living room window.

"Wait, hold on," August said, holding up his pointer finger to Noah.

As Noah faintly frowned and raised a brow, August closed his eyes. Noah watched as August's expression shifted and then softened. As August's breathing slowed, Noah could almost see it, the way August was forcing himself to think of something brighter, something *higher*. August focused on a precise, powerful vision: himself running through an open field somewhere in the realm of Amagi, along with his golden retriever,

Cooper, chasing a stick. Within a few seconds, outside of his living room window, a shimmering blue light began to fracture the darkness in the sky. The black dissipated in waves, and the sky returned to its previous, crystal-clear blue, the sun reappearing in the sky like a celestial cue ball. Noah whipped himself around and stared out the living room window with widened eyes. Slowly August opened his eyes and stared out the living room window with a brief close of his eyes and a slow exhale of relief.

“Holy shit,” Noah breathed, his voice filled with awe and disbelief. “You just...”

Noah shook his head slowly, struggling to find the words.

“You just pulled it back! You fixed it!”

August shrugged before picking up his coffee and taking a long sip.

“I had to,” August replied in a slightly low voice. “I can’t let Amagi be destroyed because of me.”

Noah cleared his throat, trying to return to the simple matter of friendship.

“Look, August, come over to me and Leah’s house for dinner tonight. My parents will be there and Christopher and Halle will be there—Just—be with us for the evening, you shouldn’t be alone—”

August interrupted immediately, shaking his head with a faint half smile.

“No, Noah. I’m not a child, okay? And I *definitely* don’t need a babysitter. I’ll be fine.”

Noah shook his head and raised a brow, still unable to believe how resistant August was to accepting even the simplest offer of help.

“Clearly, you *aren’t* fine though, August. I mean, ya just spent several minutes crying on my shoulder.”

August’s faint smile vanished. His brow shot up, his expression instantly offended.

“Wow, really? You’re throwing that up in my face already? *Classy*, Noah. Real classy, now I wish I never *had*.”

August rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“You know what? Get out—*now*,” August said, rising from the sofa, snatching his coffee cup from the table, and walking away.

“August, no, now wait, that’s not fair,” Noah said as he got up, walked after August and grabbed his arm, “because you *know* what I mean. I’m trying to *say* that you shouldn’t be in an empty house alone.”

August’s irritation intensified, replaced by an icy challenge as he sighed loudly and frowned while shaking his head.

“Jesus, why, exactly, *are* you so invested in how I’m feeling, Noah? Especially knowing how much you couldn’t even *stand* me on Earth. Hell, we’re not even friends here in *Amagi*.”

August’s words landed like a punch to Noah’s chest. The sting of August’s harsh statement cut Noah deeper than he’d expected. Offended, Noah looked away with a shake of his head and his brows raised.

“Wow, August,” Noah said in low, dejected tone, “I thought we were—or at the very least—were on our way to becoming friends—”

“Yeah,” August replied, giving a short shake of his head with one brow arched, “I thought so, too—right up until you invited Christopher to Castles ’N Coasters with you and your family, and you didn’t even think of me. It kind of told me all I needed to know: that we’re just acquaintances, not friends.”

Noah blinked repeatedly, a faint frown creasing his forehead as surprise washed over him. Noah exhaled slowly, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Well, look,” Noah said, “I’ll be honest—I didn’t ask you because I assumed an amusement park wouldn’t interest you, August. From what little I know, you seem to be more of...well, more of an aesthete who likes—art museums, libraries, and quiet places to think and all that. So, I figured dragging you to an amusement park would be torture, instead of

fun.”

August’s eyes widened, genuine surprise flickering across his face.

“Wow, an aesthete, huh?” August responded before softly laughing. “Yeah, I do enjoy museums and libraries, and sure, I like my quiet moments. But you make me sound like—Giles from Buffy the Vampire Slayer or something—serious all the time, stuffy and with zero sense of fun.”

Noah let out a light laugh.

“Well—maybe not full-on Giles but—”

“Exactly,” August cut in, shaking his head yet smiling. “I mean, I know how to have fun when I want to, Noah. A day of roller coasters and junk food would’ve been great. I would’ve really enjoyed Castles ’N Coasters.”

Noah’s shoulders sagged.

“Then I definitely misjudged you and I apologize, August. Next time we plan something—whether it’s a museum or a theme park—I’ll make sure to invite you.”

“Thanks,” August said with a nod while walking over to his kitchen counter.

Noah followed him.

“And listen,” Noah began, “for all the times I mocked you or ignored you back on Earth—you *never* gave up on me. You kept trying to reach me because you *cared*. You were the friend I didn’t even realize I needed. So, now it’s my turn to be that for you. So believe it or not, I do think of you as a friend, August—more than that, as a *brother*.”

August stared at him, the sincerity of the confession breaking through his last defense. A touched, faint frown and a slightly weak, touched smile crossed his face.

“Thank you,” August said quietly, sincerely. “Really. I mean that. And I *promise* you, I’ll be fine. I’ll...I’ll find some way to get over what I’m

dealing with. To move past it. Somehow. I have to. Especially if I don't want Amagi destroyed."

Before Noah could respond, August walked over to him and pulled him into a hug. Not the quick, performative hug from earlier—the one designed to end a conversation and send Noah on his way. This one was different. This one was *real*.

"Thank you," August said quietly, his voice muffled against Noah's shoulder. "For being here. For...not giving up on me."

Noah felt his chest tighten, the irritation draining out of him completely. He hugged August back.

"You don't have to thank me," Noah replied.

They pulled apart. Noah patted August firmly on the shoulder.

"Leah, my parents, Chris, and I are just a visit away, if you ever need to talk, seriously."

August smiled and nodded, his expression softening finally into something genuine as Noah turned and walked away, this time for good. August stood in his kitchen and let out a slow breath, one that was soft and almost resigned. As the house swallowed him in its quietness once more, this time, the silence felt just a little less heavy.

Earth

The small, beige cubicle felt like a box, and Victoria was trapped inside. She was supposed to be performing data entry on the old, humming computer screen, but her hands lay motionless on the keyboard. Her gaze was fixed on the framed photograph tucked into the corner of her desk: August, radiating an easy, young smile, his eyes full of light. A tear slid silently down her cheek, landing on the glass. She closed her eyes, and the silence of the office dissolved, replaced by the bright echo of memory. She heard him, not just in her mind, but as clear as if he stood behind her, his voice a boyish ring of triumph: "Mommy, watch! Look at

what I learned! How to ride on my bike without holding the handle bars!" The memory shifted. She saw him as a young man now, leaning across a kitchen counter, talking animatedly about something mundane, a funny but odd encounter he'd had with a cashier at the grocery store. He wasn't looking for validation; he was simply sharing his life. She heard the rich, throaty sound of his laughter as he described the encounter. The laughter was too real.

It was the sound of the life she had missed, the years she had willfully discarded. The realization—that she would never hear that sound again—was a physical blow. Victoria pressed the heels of her hands hard against her eyes, but the sound of his amusement only intensified, tearing at her composure until she broke down in deep, wracking sobs that she tried desperately to smother in the sterile quiet of her workspace. Her chest hurt, her shoulders shook, and the cubicle walls seemed to close in, offering no escape from the relentless torture of memory.

The car's interior was dimly lit by the green glow of the dashboard clock. Victoria drove mechanically toward her empty house on a rainy Tuesday night. She wasn't listening to the radio; instead, a CD played— the soothing, assured voice of a prominent religious man speaking about grief and the unwavering promise of God.

"...and the Almighty will carry His people through the storm, through the darkness, through the loneliness of the trial..."

The words were meant to be comforting, but they were hollow noise to Victoria. Her faith, which had once been her anchor, was dissolving under the weight of her suffering. Tears streamed down her face, glistening in the passing streetlights. She didn't bother to wipe them away; they were just another part of the constant, aching hum of missing her son. She drove on, lost in a quiet, fragile cycle of silent

weeping.

It was late, the house was silent, and Victoria was sitting on the sofa in August's home—the home he had left her, untouched, before he departed. The room was cast in deep shadow, the only light a cold, silver wedge filtering through the open living room window from the moon. Clutched tightly in her hands were several, folded pieces of paper: one of the final letters that August had left her. She had re-read it countless times, but tonight, the words were sharp and lethal. The letter spoke of his certainty: of the reincarnation trick after death, of the higher afterlife realm called Pleroma, and his vital, urgent mission to help souls escape the prison known as The Summerland.

He explained his conviction that Christianity was a false religion, purposefully constructed by the tricksters to ensure humans kept willingly returning to Earth's prison planet, cycle after cycle. He told her what she must do, should she decide to believe his truth, when her time came to cross over and he ended the letter with him pleading for her to believe him, so that one day he might reunite with her in Pleroma. Victoria finished the letter, her vision blurring. She let the paper drift to the floor. The contents—the sheer, stunning *finality* of his beliefs—shook her more profoundly than the grief itself. It was a choice: mourn her son under God's promise, or accept her son's truth and follow him into Pleroma.

She broke into uncontrollable, agonizing sobs that tore from her chest, lasting for several agonizing minutes. She was beyond control, beyond grace; she was just a mother destroyed. Finally, she lowered her head and held it tightly in her trembling hands, her fingers digging into her scalp. She felt utterly adrift, a terrible weight settling in the pit of her stomach. She felt more alone than she had since losing her husband,

Luke, years ago. The few family members she had left could not fill this tremendous, gaping void. She wasn't sure if she could go on the next second, minute, hour, day, or week without her son.

The knowledge that they had finally reconciled, only for him to be taken from her life, twisted the knife of sorrow into blinding guilt. *All that lost time*—the years she had cut him out—felt like a debt she could never repay. Guilt whispered that August's death was her fault, a cosmic retribution for her hardness of heart.

Her guilt was why, at that very moment, she felt she wasn't even deserving of life. As her hands trembled violently and she closed her eyes, Victoria came to an ultimate, terrifying decision. The anguish of separation was too great; the guilt, too consuming. She, in that instant, found a way to end her grief and bridge the vast, crushing distance between herself and her son.

She lowered her hands, her face stark and resolute in the moonlight. Whatever was required to join him—to prove her belief and end this devastating aloneness—she would do it. Victoria rose slowly from the sofa, the silent, silver moonlight illuminating the terrible certainty in her eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

August was deep into his morning run, the clean, high-vibrational air of Amagi filling his lungs. He was moving fast, using the physical exertion as a necessary distraction, the rhythm of his feet a counter-beat to the sorrow he was trying to outrun. He was on the residential street that curved near Noah and Leah's house when he spotted Jack getting out of his car, pulling a small, collapsible cart from the trunk. August slowed his pace and approached with a practiced ease, displaying his familiar, masking August Cameron smile—the charismatic one that said he was perfectly fine.

“Grand rising, Jack,” August greeted, “getting an early start on the food supply, I see.”

Jack, who was pulling groceries from the back seat, straightened up slowly. He was smiling faintly, but his eyes—wise, steady, and knowing—caught August's and held them.

“Yeah, I had to because if I waited for Joanna to get them, the fridge would be empty for an entire week.”

August let out a breathy laugh.

“So, how've you been holding up?” Jack asked, his tone casual, but his gaze was intent.

“Great, honestly,” August replied, the smile tightening slightly around his eyes. “I've just been keeping busy, enjoying Amagi. It's beautiful here. Can't complain.”

Jack remained silent. It was the type of silence that stretched for several seconds—long enough to feel deliberate, long enough for August to recognize that Jack wasn't buying his response. Jack's gaze didn't

waver, nor did it soften with polite acceptance. Jack just merely stared at August with those steady, knowing eyes that had probably seen through a thousand half-truths over the course of his lifetime. Finally, Jack nodded, his faint smile never leaving. He then looked briefly away toward the house, then back at August.

“Noah told me and Joanna,” Jack said quietly, his voice gentle but direct, “about how you’ve been feeling, about your wife and your mother—”

Jack paused, letting the words settle between them.

“He told me about how hard this has been for you,” Jack added.

August’s smile faltered. Just barely, but enough. His gaze shifted away from Jack’s face, focusing instead on a spot somewhere near the car’s rear tire. He nodded once, his jaw tightening, his brow lifting slightly in that way people do when they’re trying to maintain composure.

“Yeah,” August said, his voice quieter now, stripped of its earlier lightness.

“I want you to know,” Jack continued, taking a step closer, “that you can come talk to me anytime you want. About anything. I’m here for you, August. I mean that.”

August’s body language shifted into something closed off. He gave a brief nod, his brow slightly raised, and glanced past Jack. In August’s mind, this was just Jack being *nice*. Being the good man he was. August had helped Jack reunite with Noah, had been the bridge that brought Jack’s family back together, and now Jack felt obligated to return the favor with kind words and open-door offers. It was transactional. Polite. Well-meaning, but not...not *real*. Not the way family was real. Jack seemed to sense the hesitation. He leaned back against the car, crossing his arms loosely over his chest, his expression thoughtful.

“You know,” Jack said, his tone shifting into something softer, more paternal, “grief and loneliness—they’re heavy things to carry.

Especially when you've lost people who meant everything to you."

Jack looked at August with genuine understanding.

"But healing doesn't come from running from it, August," Jack continued. "It comes from letting yourself feel it, and from letting people in, and from understanding that you don't have to carry it alone."

August listened but kept his expression neutral and controlled as he displayed a small, tight smile and nodded.

"Thanks, Jack. I appreciate that. Really."

Then August's expression shifted—just slightly. His smile dimmed, and something harder, something raw, flickered across his face.

"But that's easy to say if you *have* family to help you carry it all," August said, his voice steady but edged with something sharper.

August wasn't angry—not at Jack, anyway—but the words came out with the weight of truth that couldn't be softened.

"Noah has you. He has Joanna, and he has his wife. Christopher has his girlfriend, his grandparents. Everyone here has *someone*, they have their people. Their family—"

August paused, and for just a moment, a flicker of raw, visible emotional pain tightened the muscles around his jaw, a tiny, involuntary tremor of the truth behind the words.

"I don't have that. It just seems as if everyone has their—happy ending, except for me," August finished quietly.

The words hung in the air between them, stark and undeniable.

"But," August said with a shrug of his shoulders and a brief, faint smile, "it is what it is, I guess."

Jack's expression shifted immediately—not with pity, but with something fiercer, more resolute.

"Anyway," August said, "I—"

"No, wait, wait," Jack cut in, "August, that's—that's not true. You *do* have family here."

August's gaze flicked up to meet Jack's, skeptical but listening.

"You have Noah," Jack continued. "You have Christopher. Both of them have told me and Joanna—multiple times—that you're their brother. Not just a friend but their *brother*."

Jack's voice dropped lower, more sincere.

"And you have *me*, August."

August's head tilted infinitesimally, and one perfect brow rose in a sharp, almost cynical arc. It was a fleeting, involuntary micro-expression of pure skepticism—a look that said, '*you have to say that, don't you?*' August mentally dismissed the sentiment as a standard, comforting platitude, delivered only because Jack felt obligated after their heavy discussion. August hadn't asked for pity, and he certainly didn't trust easy words.

"Look, I know Joanna didn't give birth to you," Jack said, his voice steady but thick with emotion. "But after everything you did for me—after you went above and beyond to help me reunite with my son again—"

Jack paused, his throat working as he swallowed hard.

"Well, August, I look at it this way—I have three sons, I have Noah, I have Chris and I have *you*. I consider you as my third son, and I *really* mean that. I love you *just* as much as I love Noah and just as much as I love Chris. You mean *just* as much to me as they do."

August went utterly still. His charismatic mask shattered completely. He stared at Jack, his deep frown deepening into a stunned expression of disbelief, his eyes widening just slightly at the unexpected, monumental weight of the claim. His mouth slightly opened to speak, but no sound came out. August was visibly touched—the shock of the declaration seemed to ripple through his entire posture, replacing exhaustion with stark surprise. He looked down at the ground for several seconds, the deep frown still fixed, his shoulders slightly bowed. He was processing the sound of those words: *third son...I love you just as much as I love Noah*. Finally, August looked up, his slightly glistened eyes now

fixed solely on Jack. He gave a slow, deliberate nod, the frown now faint, softened by genuine emotion.

“Wow, um—thank you,” August said, his voice quieter than before, rough around the edges. “That—”

August paused, shaking his head slightly as if still trying to process it.

“That means so much to me, Jack. You—you have *no* idea.”

Jack smiled—warm, genuine, fatherly—and without another word, he stepped forward and pulled August into a hug.

“I love you, son,” Jack said into August’s ear.

At the sound of that word, “son,” delivered with such profound sincerity, August’s mind froze. He went utterly still within the embrace, visibly stunned for two agonizing seconds as he processed the sheer, unexpected weight of the love and the title. It was a powerful wave, bringing him just slightly emotional, a tiny, controlled shiver of vulnerability. He hugged Jack back, a firm, reciprocal pressure that acknowledged the depth of the bond just forged. A faint, genuine smile finally appeared on August’s face as they released.

“I love you too, Jack.”

Jack pulled back, his smile widening into a friendly smile.

“And don’t think you’re getting away with just calling me ‘Jack’ anymore,” Jack said with a smile, “it’s Dad to you now. So prepare yourself for unsolicited advice, and a lifetime supply of groan-worthy Dad jokes. Consider yourself officially warned.”

August laughed genuinely and heartily, the sound ringing out cleanly in the morning air—a rare, unguarded sound.

“Okay,” August said with a nod and a warm smile. “I’ll endure the jokes and even the advice—just please spare me any bedroom pro tips. At my age, getting a birds-and-bees refresher from you would require its own therapy budget.”

Jack laughed heartily.

"Duly noted, smart-ass," Jack noted before sharing a laugh with August. "Now, since you're standing right there, grab those last three bags for me, would you? Consider it your first official act of duty. as my son"

August laughed and shook his head.

"Oh, okay, I see how it is. Five minutes into this father-son relationship and I'm already being exploited for manual labor. I should have read the fine print."

Jack laughed as he grabbed a grocery bag from his trunk.

"Yeah, well it's too late now," Jack joked, resulting in August laughing.

As Jack and August walked into Jack's bright, airy kitchen, setting the bags onto the granite island, they began unpacking, the domestic rhythm feeling surprisingly natural, as if they'd been doing it together for years.

"You know what we need after this?" Jack said, turning and looking at August with a brow raised, "a good rerun of *Magnum, P.I.* I haven't watched it in a month and I'm starting to get withdrawal."

August's eyes widened briefly before he turned and looked at Jack with a faint frown and smile.

"Hold on—*Magnum P.I.*? Tom Selleck, Detroit Tigers cap, shorts that should be illegal after Labor Day *Magnum P.I.*?"

"That's the one." Jack replied with a smile. "I really think I'm the only guy still hooked on that show."

"What? Hell no, I *love* that show!" August said with a hint of excitement in his voice. "I have *every* season on Blu-ray, and the limited-edition box set too, the one with the fold-out Ferrari poster."

Jack's laugh came out in a bright bark.

"What? No kidding? That's awesome! Man, I don't even own a Blu-ray player though."

"Oh, yeah, you *definitely* have to get one, Dad," August rushed

out, the last word of his sentence escaping him in a sudden, verbal reveal that bypassed all conscious thought.

Immediately, August faintly and briefly frowned and briefly closed his eyes with a light sigh. The word ‘Dad’ felt profoundly strange on August’s tongue—a foreign, powerful syllable that lodged briefly in his throat. He hadn’t used that title, not for anyone, *ever*. It was a word linked to the phantom image of Luke, a history stolen by Enki. Letting the title hang in the air was an act of raw vulnerability for August. His frown deepened, tinged with a deep, private awkwardness, and he felt the sharp dread of having committed a social transgression—that he had said something wrong and inappropriate.

August shook his head slightly, trying to dislodge the unfamiliar, complicated emotion. Jack didn’t miss the hitch. His facial expression was one of gentle understanding. He met August’s gaze and gave a slow, firm nod.

“It’s all right, August,” Jack assured him softly, his voice cutting through August’s internal anxiety. “If I didn’t want you to call me that, I promise you, I wouldn’t have told you you could. It’s *exactly* where it belongs, all right?”

August felt the tight knot in his chest ease. He laughed lightly before offering Jack a genuine, grateful yet faint half smile in return while nodding.

“Well, I’m guessing you’re still living in 1992 tech-wise?” August joked before laughing, resulting in Jack laughing as well.

“Hey, the ‘90s were a perfectly good decade,” Jack replied with a smile while putting a box of oatmeal in the cabinet. “My VCR *never* let me down.”

“Yeah, but to me, VCRs were always like huge ass—cinder blocks.” August retorted as Jack laughed. “I’m pretty sure they all ran on coal.”

“Hey, watch it, son, or I’ll make you sit through Noah’s favorite show. You know, the one where all these dolled up looking people in

their twenties and thirties sit in a New York coffee shop all day, drinking coffee.”

August glanced up from the bag of bagels he was about to shelve and frowned and then briefly closed his eyes.

“Oh no, no,” August said, “please don’t tell me his favorite show is *Friends*.”

Jack laughed.

“Yup,” Jack replied, “like a dog with a bone. He even knows all the lines of every single episode.”

August grimaced theatrically.

“Ugh, I without a doubt *hate* that show,” August said. “The laugh tracks make my ears want to bleed. The whole damn thing feels like living inside a canned ham.”

Jack laughed heartily.

“That’s exactly what I said!” Jack exclaimed. “Joanna loves it, too though, so I get outvoted every time.”

August laughed with a shake of his head as he put the ice cream in the freezer.

“Traitors,” August declared, playfully smacking the refrigerator door closed. “Ross is a whiny sociopath, Rachel’s a chaos tornado, and don’t even get me started on whatever the hell’s wrong with Phoebe.”

“Yes!” Jack said after laughing, “Finally someone who *understands*! I tried to tell Noah that Chandler’s sarcasm is just discount Hawkeye Pierce, but he looked at me like I’d grown three heads.”

“Probably because he’s too young to even know who Hawkeye Pierce is,” August said with a smile. “Poor guy. His pop-culture skills are extremely lacking if he likes *Friends* but has no idea who Hawkeye Pierce is.”

Jack laughed again, the sound filling the kitchen.

“All the more reason why we have to introduce him to the classics,” Jack said, “Magnum, Mash, Rockford, and maybe a dash of

Starsky and Hutch if we're feeling fancy."

"And Miami Vice," August added with a faint smile and a nod.

"That was *peak* television in the eighties."

They both laughed, a low sound that filled the kitchen. Jack passed August a bottle of hot sauce.

"Top shelf, left side. And hey, if there's ever a time that Noah tries to hijack movie night with Friends, we'll stage a coup."

With a wink and smile, August saluted with the bottle.

"Operation 'Stash the Sitcom' is officially green-lit."

Jack nodded and laughed.

"You know, August," Jack said while walking over and leaning up against the counter beside August, "this right here—shooting the breeze about TV shows, complaining about Noah's sitcom addiction—this is *family* stuff. Ordinary, boring, beautiful family stuff that I'm glad you're now a part of."

August smiled as Jack briefly wrapped his arm around August's shoulder, hugging him.

"Yeah," August said quietly. "I could get used to it."

Jack's blue eyes softened.

"You don't have to get used to it. Just live it."

"All right," August said with a half-smile and a nod, "but if we're living it, you're buying the popcorn for Sunday night's Magnum double-feature."

"Oh, I'll buy the popcorn," Jack said with a faint smile. "And while we're at it, we're upgrading that Blu-ray player of yours. If we're in this together, we're going full 4K."

August's eyes briefly widened as he smiled.

"Well, look at you," August teased. "From VCR coal miner to 4K evangelist in under ten minutes. I'm a bad influence."

"Or a damn good son," Jack corrected with a smile, clapping him on the back.

August looked down briefly with a faint frown and a smile, touched by Jack's words.

"Thanks, you're a really great father."

Jack smiled and hugged him close.

"Now," Jack said, moving away from the counter, "let's finish these groceries before Joanna gets home and finds out I let you put the cereal on the wrong shelf."

August smiled mischievously, grabbed a box of Frosted Flakes, and deliberately placed it eye-level where Jack's treasured coffee stock used to be.

"Consider it payback for the manual-labor blackmail," August joked.

"You little—" Jack lunged, mock-menacing.

August dodged, laughter ricocheting off the cabinets. For a moment the kitchen felt less like a room and more like a refuge built entirely of unconditional warmth.

"Okay, well that's all of the groceries," August said as he folded up a paper bag and put it in a bag holder in a pantry. "Unless you need help with anything else, I'm going to take off, go home and relax for the rest of the day."

"Great, all right," Jack said with a nod, "and I'll call you later today just to check in on you, just cause—that's what we dads do."

August laughed and then nodded.

"Good, I look forward to it."

"I love you," Jack said while pulling August into a hug.

"I love you too, and we'll talk later."

Jack nodded with a smile, watching as August left out the house with August feeling lighter than he had in weeks.

Earth

The photograph was cool beneath her fingertips. August's warm smile from the last birthday card he sent—the final, perfect image she had cherished for years—stared back at her from the frame. There was no terror in the room, only the suffocating weight of grief finally giving way to a profound, icy resolve. Her hands did not shake. There were no tears left to shed. Every attachment to the physical world—the smell of the rain outside, the faint hum of the refrigerator, the beat of her own tired heart—felt like thin, fraying ropes she was finally ready to cut. *Not an ending, but a necessary transit.* The physical sensation was a brief, sharp shock, followed immediately by silence. It was an absence, but not darkness. Then, there was only light.

It was absolute, overwhelming, and infinite, rushing toward her with the sound of a billion voices singing a single, pure note. She was not falling, but accelerating—pulled by a force greater than gravity, greater than time itself. The form she once knew was dissolving, becoming raw consciousness, liquid intention. Grief, guilt, and pain were scoured away in the blinding velocity. She held onto one single thought, the last anchor of her human life, the pure, unyielding fuel that was carrying her across the void: *August. I'm coming, mother's coming.* And then, with a sensation like waking up from a deep, heavy sleep, the rushing stopped.

Amagi

Victoria drew a sharp, cleansing breath, the air filling her lungs unlike anything she had ever known. It was light, cool, and vibrated with an inexplicable essence of profound joy. The suffocating grief, the paralyzing guilt, the memory of her final, desperate choice—all of it felt instantly distant, replaced by an overwhelming, almost painful light. She

stood rooted, looking around. The sky above was not merely blue; it was a crystalline, vibrant sapphire, clear and deep, stretching endlessly without a single cloud. High above, colorful birds—streaks of impossibly bright red, gold, and turquoise—flew in easy, graceful arcs. Everywhere she looked, the architecture was stunning: majestic glass buildings—structures of shimmering, intricate design—rose toward the light, reflecting the brilliance of the perpetual sun. These shining businesses stood harmoniously alongside charming, pristine houses and gardens overflowing with color.

Everything August had written in that final, devastating letter—the manifestation of collective, high-vibrational thought—was not just true, it was exponentially more beautiful than she could have conceived. She walked slowly, drawn by the sound of pure, unbridled laughter. She passed a wide, sprawling green park where children chased each other, their movements unrestrained and joyful. In a sun-drenched patch of grass, other children played Frisbee with their dogs, the scene utterly devoid of any shadow or malice.

The peaceful, unspoiled innocence of the moment warmed her heart so completely that fresh, glittering tears immediately blurred her vision. The sheer tranquility and profound beauty of the realm resonated deep within her. Victoria knew with a certainty that settled into her soul: this place was a mirror. The purity and light of Amagi matched the beautiful, warm sincerity of her son's soul. This brilliant, peaceful realm was a perfect, breathtaking representation of *everything* August Cameron truly was.

She came to the edge of a stretch of white sand where the ocean shimmered with impossible turquoise. She inhaled the scene in silent, spiritual awe, her gaze sweeping over the carefree figures playing by the waves. She was here. She had made it. She turned slowly, overwhelmed by the sensory input, and instantly bumped hard into a man standing directly behind her.

"Oh, my apologies!" the man exclaimed, his hands coming out instantly to steady her shoulders.

"No, I'm so sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going," Victoria stammered, still slightly dizzy from the transition and the shock of the sights.

She looked up at the man—Christopher. He was tall, with a kind, open face and eyes full of easy humor.

"Where...where exactly am I?" she asked, her voice hushed with anticipation. "What is the name of this realm?"

The man smiled easily.

"This is a realm called Amagi."

Victoria gasped, a small, choked sound escaping her lips. She brought her trembling hand to touch her mouth, and tears of absolute confirmation flooded her eyes once more. *Amagi*. August had been right. As Victoria looked all around the realm with her twinkling eyes of wonder, awe, and amazement, drinking in the impossible sights, Christopher's friendly expression shifted. He frowned deeply and raised a questioning brow.

"You know, the way you're reacting, it's like you just got here," he observed, his head tilted. "We get new souls all the time, but I haven't seen a reaction this strong since my friend's father first arrived. You new to Amagi?"

"I am," Victoria managed, forcing the emotional swell back down. She met his eyes, the desperation in her voice overriding her awe.

"And I'm looking for someone. I'm looking for August Cameron. He's my son, he's the one who built this realm, right?"

Christopher's eyes widened sharply in genuine surprise at the name. He took a short step back, processing the claim and the emotional intensity of the woman standing before him. His astonishment faded, replaced by a slow, deliberate smile that stretched across his face—a

smile that grew wider and more excited as an intricate, incredible thought clicked into place. His eyes lit up as if he had just received the greatest, most game-changing idea ever conceived by the universe. For a few moments, he held her gaze with that silent, delighted smile, the massive scope of his plan left hanging brightly in the beautiful Amagi air.

“Yeah, he is,” Christopher replied, “he built *all* this just through thought manifestation. Your son is—*amazing*, to be honest. He’s one of the coolest guys I’ve had the pleasure of getting to know.”

Victoria laughed and then smiled with pride.

“Yeah, that sounds like him,” Victoria replied, the ache in her chest temporarily eclipsed by the sheer joy of hearing someone speak so highly of her son. “Even at the age of six, he was always building LEGO structures that were almost as tall as his bedroom ceiling.”

Christopher laughed and then sighed with a smile, excited about the massive, genius idea he had in his mind.

“Well, Victoria, come with me,” Christopher said, extending out his arm to Victoria. “Before you see August, there’s some people I want you to meet.”

“Uh—okay,” Victoria said with a brief, faint frown and a slight shake of her head.

Politely smiling, she linked her arm into his before they walked away.

The morning light in Noah and Leah's kitchen was soft, filtering through a bay window overlooking a neatly manifested garden. The kitchen featured a warm, wood-top table where Christopher was nursing a massive coffee. Noah picked listlessly at a bagel, a cloud of birthday stress hanging over him.

“I’m telling you, it’s literally fucking *impossible*,” Noah said before

sighing and shaking his head. "I mean, what do you buy the guy who can literally manifest anything he wants already just by thinking about it?"

Noah shrugs carelessly with another shake of his head.

"I don't know," Noah continued, "maybe a...a definitive textbook on correcting all subtle dialectal variations between High Irish and Parisian French? Or maybe a pocket guide on some shit like—'Advanced Manifestation Techniques?'"

Christopher laughed, a confident, sharp sound.

"See, that's your first mistake. Thinking material."

"What?" Noah said in between a light laugh. "That's all I've got. Did you manage to find him a gift already?"

Christopher took a long sip of coffee, a slow, delighted smile spreading across his face—the same smile he wore when he was speaking with Victoria.

"Oh yeah, I got him a gift all right. It's something epic too."

Noah leaned forward eagerly.

"Yeah? What is it? A vintage—*Magnum* pinball machine or something?"

Christopher let out a quick, dismissive laugh.

"Nah, I can't tell you. It's a secret that you're just going to have to find out about on Saturday."

Noah laughed and then shook his head.

"Wow, that's cold, Chris, you know that, right?"

"Hey, gifts are better cold," Christopher retorted with a smile after taking a sip of his coffee.

He got serious, leaning in.

"Look, Noah. You're right—you can't just buy August anything, because physical objects are meaningless here. We have to use the unique advantage of Amagi."

"Which is?" Noah asked with a faint frown, a slight shake of his head and a brow raised.

“The gift of manifestation, specifically manifesting what August has wanted since being in Amagi,” Christopher said, dropping his voice to a low, conspiratorial register. “It’s about making him feel *grounded*. Home.”

Noah stared at him for a few seconds, his bagel forgotten. He ran the phrase through his head—*what August has wanted since being in Amagi*—and his eyes suddenly widened as the pieces of the puzzle clicked together in his mind. Christopher just watched him, his smile expectant.

“Yeah, get it?” Christopher said with a satisfied smile.

Noah laughed, a genuine, delighted sound that cut through the silence.

“Yeah, yeah, I do,” Noah replied with a smile.

Christopher laughed before exchanging his usual perfect, unspoken brother-code handshake with Noah, sealing the pact and the secret of the perfect birthday.

The days had flipped forward to Thursday, and August was stretched out on the sofa in his living room, watching an old episode of *3rd Rock From The Sun* on television. He took a long, easy sip of his beer and laughed—a genuine, unguarded sound—as Dick Solomon, the hapless alien commander, delivered a particularly absurd line about human biology. For the first time in a long time, he was fully detached, enjoying the absurd simplicity of television. The sharp, low chime of the doorbell cut through the laugh track. With a slight frown, August rose, instantly shedding the loose comfort of the sofa. When he opened the heavy oak door, Christopher stood on the threshold, and the lightness vanished. Christopher’s shoulders were slumped, his usual kinetic energy completely absent. His face was a mask of strained fatigue and palpable

disappointment.

“Hey, Chris,” August said, his tone immediately shifting to concern. “What’s up? You look like you just lost a war.”

Christopher shifted his weight, avoiding August’s eyes.

“Yeah, look, um. Is it cool if I come in? I need to talk to you about something.”

“Absolutely.” August said without hesitation, stepping back to let him pass. “You want a cup of coffee or something?”

Christopher walked into the center of the living room and sighed with a shake of his head.

“No, nothing, thanks. We should probably sit down, though. Maybe at the table.”

Christopher’s voice was low and heavy, laced with a seriousness that instantly put August on high alert. August nodded slowly, his gaze locked on Christopher’s contrived look of stress. He didn’t need to call upon his full observational abilities; the sheer oppressive weight of Christopher’s gloom was unmistakable. Whatever this was, it wasn’t a joke. It was serious. August walked over to the sofa, picked up the remote and pressed the power button, cutting off the alien antics mid-laugh track. The living room instantly became quiet, focusing all energy on the confrontation to come. As August sat across from Christopher at the kitchen table, Christopher finally met his eyes, and the look of manufactured sorrow was startlingly effective. Christopher let out a slow, heavy sigh.

“Look, August, I’m going to cut right to it,” Christopher began, leaning his elbows on the table and rubbing his temples. “About Saturday. I—I—well hell, I just have to use this word—August, I’m sorry but we aren’t going to be able to do anything for your birthday after all. It’s just...it’s Leah’s birthday this weekend, too. And Noah, Jack, Joanna and everyone—we’re planning a big party for her, and it just got too complicated trying to do two things at once, so we had to choose and so

we chose her.”

The blow landed cleanly, deep in August’s chest. He felt his eyes widen, the muscle in his jaw briefly tightening in a sharp, visible tremor. For one fragile, agonizing second, the pain of rejection was completely exposed on his face. Then, the mask slammed down. August looked away for a few seconds before a tight, dismissive smile appeared on his face. He shrugged, settling back into the chair and nodding.

“Ah. Gotcha. Yeah, no worries, man,” August said, his voice flat, forced into a casual, overly chill register. “It’s really not a big deal. Stuff happens. Besides, it’s just another Saturday for me, anyway.”

Christopher kept the gloom locked in place.

“Yeah. I mean, we really hope maybe next weekend we can get something put together, even if your birthday will technically be gone by then.”

“Yeah, yeah, no worries, it’s all good,” August replied, pulling his focus from his own pain, attempting to be the understanding friend. “I’ll just be at home, so give Leah and Noah and everyone my best wishes. Tell them I’ll more than likely drop by on Sunday with a gift for Leah.”

“Thanks, August. Really. Thanks for being so understanding.” Christopher said before standing up, maintaining the heavy, apologetic demeanor.

“Yeah, no problem,” August said as he walked Christopher to the door. “Thanks for stopping by and letting me know.”

Christopher nodded as he left out. August watched Christopher lumber away with a feigned defeated posture. However, the instant August’s door clicked shut, his carefully constructed mask shattered. August didn’t cry or anything, but his shoulders slumped, the rigid posture dissolving into sudden, raw defeat. He walked back into his silent living room that now felt cold and utterly empty around him. It wasn’t just a missed party. It was the same familiar, razor-sharp feeling he’d carried his entire earthly life. An *afterthought*. He was an

afterthought to the mother whose faith eclipsed him; an afterthought to the friends who only called when they needed him, their *support system*, not him, the *person*; he was an afterthought to the demands of Samantha's busy PR career. And now, even there, in the shimmering realm born from his own manifestation, he was still the one set aside, the easy sacrifice. It was then that his vision blurred, his eyes became shimmery—the first telltale ripple that his internal sorrow was beginning to leak into the atmosphere. The air in the room suddenly felt heavy, vibrating with his hurt.

Closing his eyes, August clenched his fists until the knuckles turned white, forcing himself to be strong. He couldn't put the realm, nor the people in the realm, through that again—not after the sorrow he had unleashed just days prior, polluting Amagi's skies with his grief. He forced his mind to steel itself, pushing the pain down. *It is what it is*, he commanded himself mentally, though the thought felt like tearing flesh. *You have to get used to it being just what it is*. He sat on the sofa heavily, and picked up the remote. He turned his television on, and although his eyes followed the movements on the screen, his mind had retreated. It focused entirely on the hurt and loneliness that had once again established a suffocating perimeter around him—a silent, toxic air that he was forced to inhale.

It was Saturday morning, and the bright, ethereal light of Amagi streamed through the panoramic windows of August's home. Despite his internal debate about why he even bothered in the first place, he was wearing jeans, his best white Nike sneakers, and a crisp white T-shirt beneath an expensive charcoal blazer, with the refined scent of Creed Aventus cologne settling over him. He'd meticulously planned to celebrate his birthday all by himself: going out for a showing of whatever

sci-fi blockbuster was playing at the Amagi cinema. It wasn't what he truly wanted, but it was better than sitting in his home, sulking and being gloomy. He poured his coffee, the rich, earthy scent momentarily distracting him from his melancholy. Just as he lifted the mug, a loud, jarring thump slammed against his front door, making him jump, sending a slosh of hot coffee over the rim.

August instantly went rigid, his eyes wide and alert, his hand hovering over the counter edge. Who the hell would be making that kind of racket at his front door? Every fiber of his being snapped into the defensive posture of a trained operative. He set the mug down, his frown deep, and moved silently toward the door. He threw the door open, his eyes immediately sweeping for a threat, only to meet the intense, giggling gaze of eight-year-old Hazel, who had been crouched on the welcome mat. Before August could speak, a plastic red suction dart, fired from a bright yellow Nerf pistol, struck him squarely on the center of his forehead with a soft *thwack*.

"Tag! You're it!" Hazel chirped, bubbling with mischievous laughter.

August stared, frozen for a beat, the sting of the plastic dart negligible compared to the sheer, stunning absurdity of the moment. Hazel, already reaching, snagged the silver key ring—the one with his car keys—from the small, decorative glass bowl sitting on the table beside the door.

"Catch me if you can!" she yelled, already sprinting backward, clutching the keys.

August let out a breathy, half-incredulous laugh that was almost a sigh, pulling the plastic dart from his forehead. It was obvious she wanted him to chase her, to engage in the most ridiculous, childish game of tag. But August was still too peeved at her parents and everyone else for making him an afterthought on his birthday, and there was no way he was walking to the cinema. *And I just put on my best blazer*, he thought

with a shake of his head. Sighing dramatically, he closed the door and walked out, his eyes following her. She was already across the street, playfully exaggerating her speed, rounding the corner that led to her, Noah, and Leah's home. He couldn't help but laugh softly at her playfulness.

It instantly reminded him of his own childhood, of him and his cousin Timmy and the elaborate practical jokes they used to pull on his mother and other family members. While he didn't quite have the patience for Hazel at the moment, he had to admit that her playful, purposeful antics were rather adorable. As he turned the corner, he saw her run through the wide-open front door of her house. It was oddly dark inside, despite the sun being high at ten in the morning in Amagi. August paused, staring at the open, silent doorway with a raised brow, a frown, and a brief, faint smirk. *Great, this has gone from tag to hide-and-seek.* He really didn't feel up for games with an eight year old at that moment, nevertheless, he needed his keys. He strode into the dark entryway and sighed loudly.

"Hazel? Let's cut this game short, sweetie, can you come out and give me my keys?"

August heard nothing but silence.

Sucking his teeth, he sighed again and reached his hand out to the wall, feeling for the light switch. Then, with a deafening POP, every light in the house—from the ceiling spots to the kitchen strips and the decorative lamps—blazed to life, simultaneously drowning the darkness in a brilliant, shocking explosion of white light. August froze instantly with wide eyes, like a deer caught in the headlights. Blinking, he frowned as he saw that Noah and Leah's living room was packed. There were colorful balloons bobbing near the ceiling, silver and blue ribbons everywhere, and draped across the wall where the large artwork usually hung was a shiny, glittering banner: "Happy Birthday, August!"

Standing shoulder-to-shoulder across the bright, rug-defined

area near the fireplace were Noah and Leah, Hazel, beaming with pride, Jack and Joanna, Christopher and his girlfriend, Halle, and at least a dozen other familiar faces of residents in the Amagi. All of them, blinking slightly in the sudden light, were smiling from ear-to-ear. A chorus of voices erupted, yelling in unison: "surprise!" August's mouth fell slightly open, and the deep furrows on his brow evaporated, replaced by a slow-dawning look of absolute shock. He looked around, noting the dining table that was loaded with wrapped gifts, a large cake, and champagne flutes. August let out a short, incredulous laugh, shaking his head.

"Wait...is—is all this really for me?"

Jack, Noah, and Christopher immediately stepped forward, moving through the crowd.

"Of course, it's for you, August! Happy birthday!" Jack boomed, throwing a welcoming arm around his shoulders.

August pulled back slightly, his expression still a mixture of shock and mild anger, directed squarely at Christopher.

"But—Chris, I thought you said everyone couldn't celebrate my birthday because Leah's birthday was also on today," August accused Christopher with a faint frown, a shake of his head and a brow raised.

Christopher laughed heartily, completely unrepentant.

"Yeah, yeah I lied, bruh. I had to find *some* way to keep you from knowing about a party until it was time for you to know, didn't I?"

Noah shook his head in mock disapproval.

"I told him, 'Chris, maybe you're going a *little* too far. Lying to August about forgetting all about him on his birthday is risky,' but did he listen?"

Christopher shrugged, smiling at August.

"Hey, when I'm part of planning something, I stop at *nothing* to make sure my plans don't get foiled."

Christopher then grew sincere for a final, brief beat.

“Besides,” Christopher said, wrapping his arm around August’s shoulder and pulling him in tight, “how could *anyone* not celebrate your birthday, August? You’re the one who literally made the realm of Amagi possible.”

August stared at Christopher with a faint frown, a raised brow and a half smile.

“I outta kick your ass, Christopher, I swear to the damn *universe*,” August said, resulting in Jack and Noah laughing.

“Aww, August, don’t be like that, buddy,” Christopher joked. “Not when we got you that fancy ass—Guinness shit that you like to drink half of the time.”

As August laughed heartily, a genuine, joyful sound that Noah and Jack took part in, August playfully pushed Christopher away, his last trace of morning melancholy evaporating in the warmth of the party.

The surprise party was in full, joyous swing. The massive, open-plan living area of Noah and Leah’s house pulsed with energy and laughter, illuminated by the Amagi sun and the bright, celebratory lights. Jack was holding court in a corner with a few older Amagi residents, their voices low and punctuated by occasional chuckles. Over in the kitchen, Leah and Halle were surrounded by a group of female residents, discussing something with animated gestures.

Blackstreet’s “No Diggity” was playing on a stereo in the corner of the living room. In Noah and Leah’s massive backyard, Hazel and a few other children were engaged in a wild, shrieking game of dodgeball, their playful screams occasionally drowning out the upbeat music pulsing from the stereo.

At the dining room table, slightly removed from the main chaos, August, Christopher, and Noah were settled with cold glasses of beer.

August was leaning back, the corner of his mouth already twitching with amusement, listening to Noah's escalating parental dread.

"See, that's the damn thing, August," Noah was saying, shaking his head with an air of profound injustice. "Hazel, she just turned nine, right? And she's already talking about boys and 'going steady' like she's got a fucking *PhD* in seduction. And Leah, she's all, 'Oh, isn't it sweet, she's finding herself.'"

Noah threw his hands up in exasperation.

"*Finding herself?*" Noah continued. "I'm like, *Leah*, she's *nine*! The boys she's looking at have the emotional maturity of a sentient ham sandwich, and she's out here giving them the green light. What the hell is sweet about that?"

Christopher let out a low laugh, a sound that managed to be both sympathetic and entirely unhelpful.

"See, Noah, your problem is you're still thinking like a father. You gotta pivot. This is a purity perimeter situation. Your job is to *enforce* the damn boundaries. But Leah is out there rolling out the red carpet, bruh. Handing out complimentary damn champagne and shit."

August took a slow sip of his beer, his half smile widening into a genuine laugh.

"Seriously, are you two listening to yourselves? Noah, you just compared the competition to fucking cold cuts, and Chris, you're building a 'purity perimeter' around a damn *nine*-year-old. You guys are operating at a panic level usually reserved for finding a dark spot in your credit score."

"No, no, August, you misunderstand," Christopher clarified, waving a dismissive hand. "I'm just describing the caliber of the threat. These little dudes, they see a girl like Hazel, and their entire brain capacity drops to a hormonal handshake. They don't have game, they just have high hopes and low impulse control. And Leah's facilitating it!"

Noah slammed his glass down on the table.

"*Exactly!*" Noah responded. "I told Leah, 'Look, she's watching these goddamn transient streams, she's doing these ridiculous dances, and I'm telling you, down the line, it'll end up being the gateway drug to...well, to the crazy shit *we* used to do on Friday nights back in high school and college, and Leah just smiles and says, 'She's expressing herself, honey.'"

Noah shook his head and sighed loudly.

"Yeah, she's expressing herself all right," Noah continued. "You know that the other day I caught her asking if little Ronnie from down the street had 'a cool vibe.' Cool vibe? He's got the social skills of a bewildered house cat, for fuck's sake."

August broke into laughter, which Christopher shared.

"Jesus, you guys are wild. If I ever—have *kids*, I'm sure I won't be dealing with all the ridiculous bullshit dread you two are stressing over."

Christopher leaned in conspiratorially.

"Oh, it's coming, August. Trust me. One day, you'll walk in on your daughter—if you have one—doing some stupid little spectral shimmy to impress some guy, and then you'll see some kid, barely old enough to babysit, looking at your daughter like she's a freshly baked cookie, and you'll want to invent a time machine just to punch his great-grandfather in his stupid, ugly ass face."

The distinct, unignorable lyric "That girl is poison!" blared from the stereo, perfectly punctuating Christopher's monologue. Noah pointed a finger at Christopher, his eyes briefly wide as he smiled.

"See?" Noah said. "*That's* what I'm talking about, that's the soundtrack to my goddamn panic attack right there. And Leah, she's just...she's just too cool with it. I swear to Christ, if I tell her, 'this boy looked at our daughter sideways,' she'll probably respond with, 'oh, is he cute?' Is he *cute*? Leah, *again*, our daughter is *nine*. He could be a goddamn low-frequency *rogue* and you'd be asking if he's got good bone structure and a nice smile!"

August looked away from them with suppressed laughter.

“Wait, what the actual hell are you even *saying* right now?”

August asked with a faint frown and a half smile. “You actually think Leah would set up a playdate with a literal spirit of chaos because he’s got—good damn bone structure?”

Christopher let out a breathy laugh.

“He’s exaggerating, August, a little. But the sentiment is accurate. Women, bruh. They got this weird—innate desire for the world to confirm their daughters for some crazy reason. It’s like they want to relive their own glory days through them or some shit, only with less supervision and more emotional damage for us men.”

August laughed heartily before shaking his head and taking another sip of his beer.

“Jesus,” August said with a smile, “you two are going to give me an ulcer from laughing so damn hard. Really though, it sounds like you two need a support group. ‘Dads Against—Daughter-Dating-Disasters’ or some shit like that.”

August laughed again with a shake of his head.

“I genuinely can’t wait to see you do stand-up at that comedy club you keep talking about manifesting, though, Chris,” August added. “The ‘Dad Jokes & Hormonal Chaos Hour’? You’d pack the place *every* night.”

Christopher flashed a wide, satisfied smile.

“Hey, somebody’s gotta keep the people here entertained, ya know? I’m just sayin.”

August laughed.

“Speaking of which,” Noah said, looking at Christopher. “You won’t believe it, but Dad was *still* losing it yesterday over that joke you told him last week. You know, the one about the guy trying to explain Bluetooth to his grandfather?”

Christopher half-smiled, taking a slow sip of his beer.

“The one where the grandpa thought he had to shout to make the signal stronger?”

“Yes!” Noah laughed, shaking his head. “Dad was literally wiping tears from his eyes at the kitchen table. He was laughing so hard he said his stomach felt like he’d done a hundred crunches.”

Christopher leaned back, draping an arm over the back of his chair with easy confidence.

“Hey, tell Pops my check is in the mail for that one,” Christopher joked. “That was premium material—I really should start billing this family for emotional labor.”

August let out a quiet, nervous laugh.

“Yeah, well, if you start sending invoices, Dad’ll probably just pay you in leftover lasagna and unsolicited advice—”

August stopped mid-sentence, his eyes widening as he realized what he’d just said. Noah looked up at him, a faint frown creasing his brow, but his half-smile and raised eyebrow signaled amusement and confusion.

“Dad?” Noah echoed, snickering lightly under his breath.

August’s composure crumbled. He rubbed the back of his neck, his confidence completely wobbling.

“Uh—right. About that,” August stammered. “I, um, talked to your dad the other day. He said it was okay if I called him ‘Dad,’ since he, you know, thinks of me as a third son. But if you’re not okay with it, I won’t do it. I mean seriously, because I don’t want things to get weird, or—”

Noah and Christopher shared a quick, easy laugh.

“So...it’s okay?” August asked, his brow briefly raised.

“Of course it’s okay,” Noah said, his tone warming instantly. “To me, you’re my brother anyway, so you calling him Dad just makes it official.”

Christopher took a slow swig of his beer, setting it down with a satisfied *clink*.

“Bruh, please,” Christopher said, his voice smooth and laced with his effortless, rhythmic charisma. “I’ve been calling the man ‘Pops’ since I was in Pre-K. If anyone should be filing a grievance, it’s Noah regarding *me*.”

Noah burst into a short bout of laughter before taking a sip of his beer.

“He’s right,” Noah said with a half-smile, pointing his bottle at Christopher. “Chris steals my thunder constantly.”

“Hey, I just bring the flavor,” Christopher said with a smile, leaning forward toward August. “Look, August. You’re good, bruh. We’re *all* family here. Blood or not, the ink is dry on that contract.”

“Exactly,” Noah agreed with a simple shrug.

As August looked between them—Noah’s genuine smile and Christopher’s laid-back reassurance—the knot of tension in his chest unspooled.

“Thank you,” August said, a genuine, relieved smile finally breaking through. “Really.”

August then exchanged a hug and a handshake/dap with Noah and Christopher.

“All right, folks! Eyes up here!” Jack called out with a wide, proud grin. “It’s now time for the obligatory, potentially embarrassing gift-giving portion of the program! Everyone find a seat or a standing spot; let’s make August open these things before the cake comes out.”

A happy scramble ensued. Leah and Halle settled onto the large sofa, Noah and Christopher sat on either side of August on the loveseat, and the other residents circled up as Jack settled the gift boxes onto the coffee table. Hazel, practically vibrating with excitement, pushed her way to the front, clutching a small, poorly wrapped square.

“I want to go first! I’m first!” Hazel announced, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

August leaned back, crossing his arms with a charismatic smile,

playing along.

"All right, and open yours first, I shall. The youngest gets the VIP treatment," August said before laughing and shaking his head.

August carefully took the gift and tore off the paper. As the fabric unfolded, his eyes widened briefly, genuine delight sparking across his face.

"Oh, wow! This is awesome!" August exclaimed, holding up a black hoodie emblazoned with the image of Tom Selleck—mustache and all—as *Magnum P.I.*

A collective, soft "Awe..." rippled through the onlookers at the thoughtful gift. August beamed at Hazel.

"Hazel, this is incredible. Thank you, sweetheart," he said before leaning down and pulling her into a warm hug and pressing a kiss to her cheek.

"You're welcome, Uncle August!" Hazel beamed, looking proud of herself. "Daddy said you love that show, and he showed me a photo of *Magnum*, so I thought, *bam!* I'll manifest a really cool one with his face on it. Even though—"

She stopped and leaned in conspiratorially, her voice dropping to a loud whisper.

"I've never watched an episode of *Magnum P.I.* in my life!"

August laughed softly at her honesty.

"Well, we are going to fix that," August replied. "One of these days, you and I are going to sit down with a giant bowl of popcorn and binge-watch the whole thing. You'll appreciate the mustache, I promise."

Hazel giggled and nodded before August hugged her again. Next, Jack stepped forward, carrying a beautifully wrapped box.

"This one is from me," Jack said softly.

August took it, feeling the weight of the box. He carefully peeled back the paper and lifted the lid. Inside, tucked neatly in tissue paper, was a small, well-loved teddy bear—Professor Ollie. August stared at the

bear in profound, stunned silence. The room seemed to fade away. He was bewildered. The only person in the world who knew about Professor Ollie—the *only one*—was his mother. August looked up at Jack, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“How...how did you know about Professor Ollie?” August asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Jack shuffled his feet, a flicker of nervousness crossing his face. He sighed, knowing he had to tread carefully to avoid revealing the big surprise too early.

“I...well, I read you the other day, August. With my ability. That’s how I knew you once had a bear named Professor Ollie. I didn’t mean to pry, but I saw the memory and knew what it meant to you.”

August turned his gaze back to the bear. As he stared at the worn fur and button eyes, a montage of memories flooded his mind, vivid and aching. He saw the soft, golden light of his childhood bedroom. He felt the gentle, reassuring touch of his mother’s hands as she handed him the bear for the first time. He could smell her perfume—lavender and vanilla—as she tucked him in, placing Professor Ollie under his arm to ward off the nightmares. He remembered the late-night comfort, the way hugging this bear was the only thing that helped him sleep when the silence of the house became too loud. August ran a thumb over the bear’s ear, a faint frown of sadness settling on his features.

“He reminds me so much of my mom,” August whispered, his voice thick. “It means...it means a lot to me to have him with me. Especially since I can’t have my mother with me right now.”

The emotion swelled in August’s chest as August shot up, rushed over to Jack, and hugged him close.

“Thank you,” August whispered in Jack’s ear, his voice thick with emotion. “Thank you for this.”

Jack smiled as he hugged August back.

“You’re welcome, son. I love you.”

"I love you too, Dad," August replied.

As August and Jack released from the hug and August sat back down, Christopher immediately jumped in, breaking the heavy atmosphere by thrusting a rectangular box toward August.

"All right, all right, that was touching," Christopher said, "but let's switch gears. I spent a lot of astral money on this gift, August—well, not really but still—you better act like it's the best thing you ever saw."

The room erupted in laughter at Christopher's timing. August laughed himself before beginning to unwrap the box. Opening the box, August pulled out the item inside and froze. It was a standard, bright orange box of open Kleenex tissues.

"A box of Kleenex?" August said aloud, his tone low and incredulous.

August let out a short, breathy laugh afterward, staring at the tissues like they were a prank.

"Chris, what the hell is this for?"

Christopher leaned forward, his face dead serious, channeling that specific, high-energy comedic vibe.

"I'll tell you what this is for," Christopher said, waving a hand. "This right *here*? This is a strategic gift, all right? It's for what's coming up *next*! Because what's *about* to happen—"

Christopher stopped and leaned back with his eyes wide.

"It's gonna make you cry. And I *don't* mean a single tear. I'm talkin' about a *hard* cry. I'm talkin' that Good Will Hunting, Matt Damon, 'It's not your *fault*' type of crying! I'm talkin' gasping for *air* type of crying! Oh yeah, you *gonna* need this *whole* box, player!"

A wave of explosive laughter swept through the room. August laughed heartily, shaking his head at Christopher's antics.

"Oh, if only I had a friend like you all during high school and college. You would've turned every stressful moment into a comedy special. You're absolutely ridiculous, Chris," August said, tossing the

Kleenex box onto the table but keeping it within reach. "But thank you. I'll keep it on standby just to humor you."

As August laughed, the stereo—still playing in the background—switched tracks and began a slightly low, yet unmistakable, cover of Journey's "Don't Stop Believing." Christopher cleared his throat, the sound sharp and commanding, and became visibly serious, his comedic mask dropping away entirely.

"All right," Christopher said, his voice lowering, the change in pitch immediately commanding attention. "Are you ready for your *real* gift?"

August laughed, shaking his head with a brief, faint frown of confusion, still riding the wave of the Kleenex joke.

"Yeah, sure," August replied, a skeptical smile on his face, one eyebrow raised high. "What is it? Uh...some—director's copy of *The Notebook* or something? Because if it is, I *swear* I'll stab the DVD box right in front of you, Chris. I absolutely *hate* that movie."

Everyone around August—Noah, Jack, Leah—let out a burst of relieved laughter, even Christopher cracking a faint smile.

"Nah, August, no romance movies," Christopher said, shaking his head.

Christopher then walked toward August quickly, grabbing both of his arms and pulling him gently but firmly up to his feet.

"Stand up, August."

August let out a playful, exaggerated sigh, briefly closing his eyes, but his smile remained. Behind August, in the shadow of the hallway, a small, nervous figure quietly stepped out. Victoria, August's mother, stood there with an excited yet hesitant half-smile on her face. August was oblivious as he was still focused on Christopher. August laughed again at his friend's dramatic flair.

"Jesus, Chris, you're going all out for this one, huh?" August said, still smiling. "If it's something else ridiculous—"

“August,” Christopher interrupted, his voice firm.

August continued talking, ignoring the warning.

“—or even something cringe, like some stripper or something, let me remind you, there are *kids* here—”

“August!” Christopher interrupted again, louder this time, his voice cutting through the rising murmur of the crowd.

August instantly stopped talking. He looked at Christopher with a raised brow, his smile fading just a little.

“Look behind you,” Christopher said with a half-smile.

August scoffed lightly, shaking his head again, thinking it was some kind of banner or poster, before he turned around. The moment he saw her—her golden brown hair, the familiar shape of her face, the way she was biting her lip to contain her joy—August froze solid. His breath hitched, turning ragged and hyperventilating in his chest. His eyes widened slowly until they were glossy blue pools filling rapidly with tears. The transition from amused annoyance to complete shock was immediate and physical. Christopher, watching the agonizing freeze, broke the silence with an amused smile.

“Well, come on, bruh. Say something. Don't be rude.”

Finally, after several seconds that felt like a lifetime, August's voice broke the silence, thick with emotion.

“Oh my god, oh my *god*,” August said in a low tone, the words quivering.

Victoria's smile widened, tears instantly tracing clean paths down her cheeks.

“Hey, honey bunny,” she said softly.

That was all it took. The tears streaming from August's eyes turned into a torrent as he shouted his mother's name.

“Mom!”

August launched himself across the short distance, pulling her into a tight, desperate hug that almost knocked the smaller woman off

her feet. She held him just as fiercely, and August broke into heavy, raw sobs—not loud, but gut-wrenching, the kind that shook his shoulders with loads of suppressed pain and loss. Victoria, too, shared his sobs, her lighter cries muffled against his chest. They stayed locked in that embrace for several, beautiful, silent seconds as the party watched, utterly undone by the raw emotion. As they slightly pulled away, clinging to each other, Christopher humorously strolled over with the box of Kleenex in hand.

“Told ya, bruh,” Christopher said softly with a smile, handing the box to Victoria.

Victoria took the box, laughing through her tears, and immediately used the tissues to gently wipe the streaming tears from August’s face as they both continued to cry, though lighter now.

“How? How did you get here, Mom? How did you find Amagi?” August choked out, his voice hoarse.

Victoria’s smile was radiant and her face was glowing.

“Oh, honey bunny, I got your letter, remember? The one that told me what this place really was. You told me not to wait too long. And I decided, I didn’t want to wait years later to join you. I needed to be with my honey bunny *now*.”

She squeezed his hand.

“So I got out of the matrix, August. I left that crazy world...to be with you. Because wherever you go, I go.”

August, sobbing lightly now but overwhelmed with joy, pulled her into another deep, grateful hug.

“I love you, Mom,” he whispered, his voice still thick with tears.

“I love you too, honey bunny,” she replied, their reunion wrapping the entire room in an emotionally charged, heartwarming embrace.

The party was finally winding down, the vibrant energy of the celebration settling into the comfortable, quiet hum of departure. The Amagi evening air was cool and sweet as guests drifted out onto the porch, exchanging final hugs and promises to meet up later in the week. August stood near the doorway, a large, overflowing gift bag slung over one shoulder, his eyes scanning the thinning crowd. His mother, Victoria, had already left a few minutes prior, wanting to get to August's house to prepare some tea and settle in before he came home. August frowned slightly, looking around the living room and the kitchen.

"Hey, Dad? Joanna?" August asked, catching Jack and Joanna as they stood near the foyer. "Have you guys seen Noah?"

Jack looked around before shaking his head with a shrug.

"You know, I haven't seen him in about twenty minutes. I thought he was in the backyard with Hazel, but she's in the den watching cartoons."

"Yeah," Joanna added, checking the kitchen. "He just sort of...disappeared. Maybe he had to step out to handle something?"

August's frown deepened with a pang of disappointment.

"All right. I guess I'll—drop by tomorrow and see him then."

Jack nodded and together with Joanna, they waved with a smile before August left, but not before August waved goodbye at them back. Adjusting the heavy bag on his shoulder, August stepped out onto the porch. Christopher was just ahead of him, chatting with Halle and heading toward the steps.

"Hey, Chris," August called out, his voice firm. "Hold on a second."

Christopher stopped mid-stride and turned back with a brow raised and a smile.

"So, was that a birthday party to enjoy or what?" Christopher asked. "I mean, I did wanna have strippers for like—later when the kids would be like in another room playing Nintendo sixty-four but you know Noah and Jack were like, 'Bruh, the only clappin' tonight better be

dominoes hittin' the table, not Destiny and Cinnamon hittin' a pole.' ”

August laughed, shaking his head. His expression then shifted into something more serious, more vulnerable. He stood there for a moment, searching for the right words, then let out a slow breath.

“I just...I need to say this before you go,” August began, his voice steady but weighted with emotion. “What you did tonight—bringing my mother here—that wasn't just a gift. That was...”

August paused, his throat tightening.

“That was *everything*, because since being up here, I've been emotionally *drowning* in sadness and then you turn around and do what you did, you give me back someone I just *knew* that I'd lost forever. And I mean, you didn't even *have* to do that for me.”

Christopher opened his mouth, likely to crack a joke, to deflect with humor the way he always did when things got too heavy. But August shook his head.

“No, *don't*—don't do what I know you're about to,” August said with a half-smile, “don't joke this away. I'm serious, Chris. You could've just shown up, had a good time, and then called it a night. But you went out of your way to make this happen for me and I will never, *ever* forget that. And so, I need you to know that you'll *forever* have a place with me—not just as my very best friend, but as my brother, for an eternity.”

Christopher blinked, his usual bravado faltering for just a second. Then, true to form, Christopher let out a loud, sharp exhale, stepping back and waving his hands frantically near his face, his eyes widening in exaggerated panic.

“Nah, nah, nah!” Christopher said, his voice rising into a high-pitched, hilarious register. “I see what you doing! You trying to make a grown man cry in front of his lady! You trying to get the waterworks going! Look at my face, August! Look at it!”

Christopher scrunched his face up, fighting back imaginary tears with theatrical effort.

"I'm holding it together by a thread, man! A *thread*! You come over here with your 'brother' talk and your 'that was everything' speech...you tryna ruin my street cred, bruh!"

Christopher wiped a fake tear, sniffing loudly and dramatically.

"You too *intense*! You supposed to just say 'thanks, dawg' and keep it *moving*! You pouring your whole heart out like we in a damn Tyler Perry movie or something!"

August burst into laughter, the sound hearty and loud, shaking his head at his friend's ridiculous display.

"No," Christopher said with a smile, "I was happy to make that moment happy for you, bruh. You're a great friend, *and* a great brother."

August smiled as he and Christopher exchanged a hug and a handshake.

"All right," Christopher said as he pulled away from him, "I'm gonna get out of here but we'll talk later."

Nodding as Christopher walked away, August turned and walked down the street toward his own home.

The path back to August's home felt different. Lighter. The emotional residue of the party still clung to him, but it was no longer a weight—it was a rush of pure energy. He unlocked the front door and stepped into the small, quiet space that had been his refuge. The kitchen light was on. August frowned faintly and smiled, dropping his heavy bag of gifts by the counter. His mother, Victoria, was standing with her back to him, humming a tune as she meticulously rearranged the food products in his cabinets.

"Mom? What are you doing?" August asked, laughing softly.

Victoria didn't stop, but she smiled with pride as she organized a row of canned goods.

"I'm putting your supplies in alphabetical order, honey bunny. How do you expect to find anything in an emergency if you have soup next to sugar?"

August laughed, walking up behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist and hugging her while resting his chin on her shoulder. Her presence, her simple, motherly actions, were the most comforting things in the world. Letting her go, he kissed her on the cheek before hopping onto the counter beside her.

"Mom, I need to know something," he said, his smile softening. "My letter...the truth about Amagi, about Pleroma, about consciousness. What made you stop believing in everything you knew, as far as Christianity is concerned and finally believe what I was saying?"

Victoria stopped stacking cans and turned fully toward him, her hands settling gently on his knee. Her eyes, full of a deep, serene wisdom, held his.

"Well, honey bunny," she responded, "when I read what you wrote, something cracked open inside me. For the first time, you weren't just my sweet, stubborn boy arguing with me. You were *explaining*. Calm. Clear. Like you'd lived it. And I felt it, right here."

She pressed a hand to her chest.

"Like scales falling off my eyes. Years of being told one thing, and in one night, my own son hands me the truth in a way I could finally hold it. I knew if I stayed in that old life one more day, I'd be choosing fear over you. And I wasn't gonna do that. Not ever again."

August leaned forward and kissed her gently on the cheek.

"I love you, Mom," he said, as she beamed like sunrise.

He reached for a bag of unopened chips sitting on the corner, tore it open, and popped a chip into his mouth. Victoria's eyes widened instantly, and a look of deep, familiar maternal horror crossed her face. She snatched the bag from him.

"August Cameron!" she chastised, voice sharp. "You've just had a

great birthday dinner and birthday cake, I hardly think you need chips right now. You'll have an upset tummy later, and then who has to hear about it?"

August stared at her with a tongue-in-cheek smile and a faint frown, his heart swelling with affection.

"See, *that*," he said after laughing softly, "that overprotective, slightly neurotic mothering is what I missed the most."

She playfully pushed his shoulder, and he laughed again. Their tender moment was interrupted by a knock, and then Noah walked in from the backyard, his expression serious.

"August, forgive the interruption," Noah said, his tone low. "But can you spare a moment to talk?"

Victoria smiled, sensing the shift in mood and energy. She gave Noah a warm, comforting look, then turned to her son.

"Ooh, that's my cue to leave, honey bunny. I will see you tomorrow morning for breakfast, okay?"

August frowned deeply, confused.

"Wait, where are you going? Where are you sleeping?"

Victoria walked toward the open sliding doors that led to the backyard.

"I'm exhausted, sweetheart. So I'm going straight to sleep in the guesthouse."

"But...I don't have a guesthouse," August said with a slight shake of his head, a faint frown and a brow raised.

Victoria paused at the door, turning back with a mischievous smile and a playful wink.

"Oh, we do now. You can thank Chris for teaching me how to thought-manifest."

August laughed, shaking his head in amused amazement. Before leaving, Victoria walked over to Noah and hugged him warmly. August hopped off the counter, folding his arms.

“So, where did you disappear to after the party? I wanted to thank you.”

Noah walked toward August, casually shrugging.

“I had to get your gift together, August. I couldn’t give it to you at the party. I needed—time.”

August’s eyes widened in humorous surprise.

“Wait, so you *did* get me something?”

August sighed dramatically with a roll of his eyes.

“Please don’t tell me it’s some DVD copy of the show *Friends* or I swear I’ll never talk to you again.”

Noah laughed, shaking his head.

“No, it’s better. But I wanted to wait. After Christopher’s gift, anything else would have been emotionally too much for one night.”

August let out a short, breathy laugh, raising a brow.

“Okay, what did you get me? A...red Ferrari 308 GTS?”

Noah half-smiled, shaking his head.

“Maybe you ought to just follow me out to the backyard and see what the gift is.”

August displayed a tongue-in-cheek smile, shaking his head, and followed Noah out the back door. The backyard was lit only by the somewhat dim flood lights that were bolted to the back of the house, casting a quiet, dreamlike glow that made the whole scene feel like it was unfolding inside a memory. At the far end, Victoria’s newly manifested guesthouse sat like a cozy beacon.

But close by, behind them, was an anomaly: a man in a tuxedo sitting at a grand piano with a microphone, singing at a low, haunting volume. The song was “Talking to the Moon” by Bruno Mars. August stopped dead in his tracks. That song. It was *the* song—the one he cherished because its lonely, yearning lyrics had perfectly captured his ache and reminded him so much of Samantha after her death. August raised a brow, staring at the singer, then back at Noah, slightly weirded

out.

“Um—Noah, what the hell is this?” August said after laughing nervously, a feeling of deep, nostalgic dread washing over him.

Noah turned, his gaze soft but serious.

“August, I wanted to give you the gift of bringing back Samantha, your wife. But I couldn’t. She’s already reincarnated and unlike what Chris found out with my mother, there doesn’t seem to be any trace of Samantha’s IS-BE *anywhere* still around in the universe.”

August looked down, nodding slowly with a somber, slightly hurt frown, the reality of that truth still a sensitive topic.

“However,” Noah continued, stepping closer. “I recently found out about something called reimagining. That’s when a creator god here can use their thought intention ability to manifest a *reimagined version* or a copy of someone or something. That copy will look, talk, think, behave, and act just like the original.”

August’s head snapped up, the color draining from his face.

“That’s the closest anyone in Pleroma will ever get to being reunited with a loved one who has already reincarnated, and with no trace of their IS-BE being still around in the universe,” Noah said, his voice filled with gentle conviction. “So, in my opinion, reimagining is a *hell* of a great thing rather than not having that missed someone at all.”

August was frozen, listening, the shock building in his eyes.

“Close your eyes, August,” Noah commanded gently. “Think of her. Visualize Samantha. Her looks, her voice, the way she smiles, her scent—everything.”

August frowned, unsure, but closed his eyes anyway. He instantly pictured her: the soft, wavy curtain of her dark brown hair, the way her full bangs fell perfectly across her forehead, the gentle curve of her neck, the familiar, enchanting scent of lavender and roses that always clung to her skin like a whispered promise. Within seconds, August heard a soft sound. A sound that was impossible, yet real.

“Hello, Cameron.”

August slightly gasped as he shot his eyes open. Standing a few feet away was *Samantha*. She was stunning. Her rich, wavy brown hair fell just past her shoulders, framing her warm, dark eyes and that familiar, loving smile. She wore a flowing, white, sparkling evening gown that made her seem ethereal yet utterly solid. Immediately, his eyes flooded with tears. Noah smiled as he walked past August, giving his shoulder a firm, supportive pat.

“You can thank me later.” Noah said before walking away and out the backyard.

August’s frown deepened, and as a testament to the storm of feelings raging within him, a loud, short exhale escaped from him.

“Is—is this real?” August whispered in a low, tearful voice. “Is it—is it really you?”

With a smile that held more promises than the stars above, she approached him and embraced him, a haven from the storm of his emotions.

“Yeah, it’s me, Cameron,” she assured him, her voice a soothing balm, “it’s really me. Me reimagined, but it’s me.”

Lowering his head, he surrendered to his sobs, the profound relief of seeing her dissolving all his control. She held him tight, her own tears mingling with his in a silent testament to the years lost, to the pain endured. When she gently pulled back from him, their lips met. The kiss was the language of their lost years. It was passionate, demanding, and overwhelming in its tenderness, yet raw with the steamy, remembered familiarity of a love that defied death. It was a kiss August had mourned for, a dizzying reunion of two souls that brought back every single nostalgic, loving, joyful memory they had ever shared. It was a kiss that sealed their bond, stripping away years of grief and leaving only the eternal, burning reality of *them*. As they reluctantly parted from the kiss, he rested his forehead against hers, tears cascading from his eyes.

"There was *never* a day where I didn't miss you," August confessed, his voice a low, tearful whisper.

Samantha's beginning response was a weak smile, her frown momentarily betraying the depth of her own emotions. She caressed his face gently, a touch that spoke volumes.

"I know. Every day without you felt like a song with no rhythm," she echoed his sentiment, her voice equally laden with tears. "Being without you wasn't just an emotional void; it was a physical agony that clung to me, relentless, every single day. But now, we never have to endure that separation again. You and I are a bond that will now remain unbroken, eternal."

He returned her smile, gently brushing a strand of hair from her eyes, a tender gesture filled with love.

"For all eternity," he whispered, pulling her close once more for a kiss that sealed their promises, their hearts melding together in a moment of perfect unity.

As they parted, Samantha's eyes widened in joyous surprise, a gasp escaping her lips before she beamed with happiness.

"Wait, Cameron," she said, her voice rising with excitement. "Look."

Her hand interlocked in his, guided him towards a stroller that was a few feet away. Inside, a baby lay, swaddled and sleeping.

"Your son, Joshua, he's here too," she revealed, her voice ringing with maternal pride.

August's gaze fixed on the infant, his heart swelling with a myriad of emotions—shock, awe, and an unfamiliar, fierce love. Tears instantly clouded his vision as he took in the sight of the son who would be his legacy and his future. Samantha gently lifted Joshua into August's arms, and at that moment, as Joshua's bright blue eyes met August's, a smile briefly lit up his tiny face.

"Oh wow, he has my eyes," August whispered with a smile that

mirrored Samantha's, his voice thick with emotion.

"Hello, little guy. It's me, your dad."

Joshua's cooing response was like a balm to August's soul, a sign of unconditional love and acceptance.

"I think that's his way of saying he loves you," Samantha said, leaning her head on August's shoulder.

August and Samantha both shared a soft, tearful laugh. For the first time in years, the ache in August's chest wasn't pain but something fuller, something *whole*. Right then, to August, it was only the three of them, enveloped in a moment that seemed to stretch into forever.

La Chappelle's Bistro was perched above Amagi's mirrored canals like a crystal nave, its arched glass ceiling netting the noon sunlight into rivers of molten gold. Violins murmured beneath the chandeliers, and perfume-sweet air drifted across white-linen tables. August had taken the alcove beneath the tallest window, the place where you could see, all at once, the alpine peaks, the flowering terraces, and the teal sweep of sky that made the city feel limitless.

Yesterday he had held Victoria in his arms again, felt Samantha's fingers lace through his, he laughed with them at the breakfast table earlier that morning, something he once thought he'd never be able to see happen. As Noah and Christopher sat across from August, three glasses of amber beer sitting on the table in front of them, untouched, August looked at them both. He then rested his hands on the table, his fingers tapping softly as if marking the beat of a thought.

"I asked you here," August began, his voice low, "because I needed to say something to both of you. And I need you to hear me—*really* hear me."

Noah leaned in. Christopher straightened, his expression open,

for once not hiding behind humor. August breathed deeply.

"People come into our lives for a reason," August said, "I've always believed that. Maybe more than I should. But *now*?"

August stopped and shook his head gently.

"Now I believe it *deep* in my *soul*."

August raised his eyes to Noah.

"I believe in fate," August continued, "and I truly believe that it was fate that had my car stall right in front of your house back on Earth, Noah. If that hadn't happened—if I hadn't been forced to knock on your door—I wouldn't have had the *profound* honor of knowing you, and the honor of, later, knowing Christopher. And without that history, I wouldn't have had the happiness that I have here now in Amagi."

August took a slow, deep breath, his eyes bright with sincerity.

"What you both did for me—bringing my mother back, bringing Samantha back—it wasn't just you two giving me a gift, it was you two *saving* me. What you two did proved that this realm—Pleroma, it's *real*, and the love that *circulates* through this realm is *real*. Meeting you two wasn't a coincidence. It was *fate*, and it's a fate that I'm grateful for every single day that I draw breath."

Noah swallowed hard, blinking fast.

"Damn, man," Christopher said in a slightly low voice with a brow raised, "you tryna make us cry before the appetizers come out?"

As August and Christopher lightly laughed, Noah stared at August for a long moment, and his hands tightened around his beer glass before he finally exhaled, a shaky little laugh escaping him.

"August," Noah said almost quietly, "I need to say something too. On Earth, when you first showed up at my door...I wasn't just rude, I was downright cruel. You were trying to help me, and I took every chance I could to shove you away."

Noah stopped and shook his head, remorse working through him.

"You talked about spirituality, about truth, about my father reaching out from the Summerland, about *all* the things you could see but that I couldn't—and I thought you were either crazy or cruel. I was so certain that what I believed in was all there was."

Noah met August's eyes.

"But you never gave up on me," Noah continued, "even after I rejected everything you offered and even when you *said* you were going to, you *never* did. My father always said the true teachers in our lives are the ones who show us what we're most afraid to see in ourselves. You did that for me, August. You showed me there's *more*—that *we're* more. August, you're the *best* inspiration I've ever had, and I'm proud you never gave up on me, and I'm even prouder to call you my friend and my brother."

August let the words sink in, nodding his acceptance and thankfulness for Noah's words as he became deeply moved, a lump forming in his throat.

"Let's make a toast then," August said, clearing the emotion from his throat before raising his glass high in the air.

Noah and Christopher mirrored the action.

"To friendship," August declared. "To family, and to eternal happiness and bliss in Amagi, and in Pleroma—the realm where we always belonged."

"To Amagi and Pleroma," Noah and Christopher echoed, the words a promise, a future, and a final home.

The three glasses clinked—a solid, sharp sound in the otherwise peaceful afternoon—and they took a long, shared sip. A shimmer, almost imperceptible, rippled through the air—as if Amagi and Pleroma itself leaned close enough to witness the moment. August felt it, Noah felt it, and Christopher felt it. For the first time, all three of them were *exactly* where they were *meant* to be: at *peace*, in *Amagi*, in *Pleroma*—their *home*.